In 2002, the 400-year anniversary of the founding of the Vereenigde Nederlandsche
Geoctroyeerde Oostindische Compagnie - the “VOC” or Dutch East India Company will be
commemorated through a series of expositions in the Netherlands. This business venture, which due
to its expansive nature sometimes has been characterized as the world’s first multinational, was
unique in several respects. Because of the great risks involved in trade to the Far East, the company
was provided at its establishment in 1602 with permanent shareholder capital and a monopoly on all
trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. Moreover, the highest ruling college of the Republic, the
States General, surrendered a number extraordinary powers like the conclusion of treaties with
“Eastern Princes and Potentates,” the building of fortresses, and even the right to appoint VOC
officials in the field “for the maintenance of good order, protection, and justice.” With such powers
at its disposal, the Company set down roots in Asia and became an effective offensive weapon in
the war against Spain and Portugal.¹

Situated in Asia amongst “feigned friends and declared enemies” company officials could
choose with the full support of the State between schenkagie (the pursuit of favorable trading
conditions through (tribute) gifts and diplomacy) or conqueste (the conquest of land or the coercion
of favorable trade conditions through the medium of violence) as means of establishing trade
relations. Jan Baptist Weenix’s painting at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam beautifully portrays this
foreign policy dilemma. In the foreground we see the ambassador, Johan van Twist, on horseback
accompanied by his retinue on their way to the court of the Sultan of Visiapur (Byapur) to conclude
an alliance against the Portuguese.² In the background, Dutch ships are shown moored in the roads
before Goa like a cordon surrounding the Portuguese capital in India. In other words, diplomacy
and force together in one scene.

The discussion pertaining to the use of force by Europeans in early modern Asia has had new
levels of research brought to it through recent publications by Geoffrey Parker and other
representatives of the so called ‘New Military History.’³ Unfortunately, no such general study exists
for western diplomatic activities in Asia during the same period. As far as the Dutch are concerned,
this is particularly noteworthy since the archive of the Dutch East India Company contains a
plethora of material for just such a study. Contrary to the impression given by Parker, in the early
Modern period the Dutch had a reputation for preferring a soft-handed approach in order to reach
their objectives in Asia. According to Raden Natakusuma, one of the Sultan of Yogyakarta’s trusted
counsellors in the second half of the eighteenth century, the English sought recourse to violence
almost immediately while in contrast the Dutch almost always strove to reach their goals through
persuasion.⁴

During the early modern period, the High Government of Batavia could conclude treaties,
wage war, administer justice, and establish settlements according to its own interests. Although at first Dutch merchants were confused by their new surroundings, they quickly learned to organize matters according to the customs and practices of the pluralistic Asian society about them. The establishment of trading stations here and there was made possible through the conclusion of trade contracts, treaties of friendship, and military alliances. Consequently, the Company representatives had to take part in all sorts of strange practices, most of which the vast majority of Europeans could never have been coerced to do; they were willing to kowtow, the Chinese and Japanese practice of sitting on their knees while bending their heads over and touching the ground, or to follow the Siamese Court’s practice of lying sideways and moving, crab like, across the floor.

In his comparative study *Rival Empires of Trade*, the American historian Holden Furber characterizes European activities in Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a new and original way. Calling this period “The Age of Partnership” Furber focuses not only on the partnership between the more or less equal European and Asiatic partnership but also on the pre-colonial situation where the participants in the international economic and political arenas still could make free choices. According to Furber however, we should not represent that “partnership” too romantically. Market traffic is based on mutual interest and competition, and occasionally that economic traffic was also compelled by the threat of violence. The delivery of certain products at a set price, like pepper for example, was not established through market transactions but in exchange for certain services like protection through firmly established treaties. Treaties, capitulations, and contracts were looked upon as attempts to bring about stable trading conditions. All this belonged to the realm of that basic form of international law about which Van Vollenhoven once jokingly said:

[...] a law for self-determined, independent, perhaps aggressive, but certainly quite undisciplined chaps, who want to be their own bosses. It provides the rules for their association, their pranks, their outings and their brawls.

Now to return to Furber’s thesis in *The Age of Partnership*. The crucial question is whether or not we can trace the means with which European maritime trading companies were able to nestle in
and around Asian empires, and what agreements they made in the dynamic Asiatic region where they were established. This question becomes even more important when one realizes that the nature and character of their presence in Asia noticeably changed between 1600 and 1800. After a long period of acclimatization they very suddenly became important territorial powers by the end of the eighteenth century. As early as 1784, the British Parliament had deprived the East India Company of its political and diplomatic powers through the passage of the India Bill, a company which, as Peter Marshall has pointed out expanded in less than fifty years from a trading body that possessed a number of scattered factories along the coast of India, to the ruler of whole provinces with a population of more than 50 million people. In the Dutch case the same phenomenon occurred: after the Company had consolidated its sovereignty over Java, Ceylon, and the Moluccas. In 1796 the newly established Batavian Republic took over the Company’s colonial possessions.

Close inspection reveals that historians have paid little attention to the diplomatic relations of the VOC. In the seventeenth century and for an important part of the eighteenth century, the Dutch were active in trade along most of the coasts of Asia. A number of studies have recently appeared in which the role of the VOC is placed in a broader regional perspective, and in which more attention is now paid to its diplomatic activities. But, however large the VOC’s enterprise, the directors of that most powerful trade operation in the world were conscious of their limitations. “The Indian world is too large for us to possess everything, and the land here too small to dispatch the necessary power as the colonies demand,” wrote Governor-General Van Diemen. The Gentlemen XVII were in complete agreement. The High Government in Batavia that served in Asia stated:

“The best [way] is to submit to the laws of these Asian countries we deem it to be much better for us to be subjected to the laws and customs of those lands than to resort to arms, as long as it is tolerable and one can still trade profitably there.”

Agreements were concluded so that people could get along with - could tolerate one another. But what is actually known about these treaties? What do they tell us about the nature of Dutch-
Asian or for that matter European-Asian relations? How frequent and under what circumstances where they concluded, and to what extent were they honoured?

Let me provide an example concerning the last point. The Sultan of Yogyakarta on the island of Java had promised to build a Dutch fort next to his court, but managed to delay the construction because he had his hands full, so he said, with the construction of his own palace. As a result, the fort remained incomplete 28 years after the date of the original agreement. The Sultan’s position appeared not so much in the treaty stipulations that he had signed, but in the way he actually carried out that treaty, or failed to do so.

Fortunately we can answer several of the questions posed above on the basis of the Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum, an extensive source publication composed of 1188 international treaties from the VOC period that appeared in six parts between 1907 and 1955. Like the subject it describes, this source publication too has had a long history.

In 1843, the Minister of Colonies Baud had requested that his officials make a list of all “nations, tribes, and leaders in the Eastern Archipelago” that were under Dutch influence. Baud wanted to direct this study towards the actual legal stipulations in order to defend its territories against its obtrusive English neighbour. His officials appeared however, incapable of delivering to him the necessary information about all the agreements and treaties, which had been concluded in the Zaman Kompeni, the Company period.

Minister De Waal, Baud’s successor, saw everything in a broader context. He was not primarily interested in these old treaties from the point of view of nineteenth century power politics; rather he believed that a detailed examination of the early VOC treaties might prove enlightening for the historical knowledge of earlier Dutch diplomatic transactions in Asia.

It was not until 1907 however, that Professor J.E. Heeres published the first collection of 192 political contracts and other treaties from the early VOC period. Twenty-five years would pass before Part Two of the collection was completed.

From the first sentence of the foreword of Part Two, it becomes clear why Heeres had placed
so little emphasis on the speedy completion of the project. He was very upset that Dutch historians had made little or no use of his work. “Some had shrugged their shoulders, others brushed it aside as a sample of worthless information;” only the “great interest” shown by foreign scholars “provided some compensation for its disappointing reception at home.” That he continued with the work was only because, as a historian, he wanted to see “the contracts not only as legal titles, but also as so many milestones along the road laid by the Netherlands while building up its colonial power in the East.”¹⁴ After Heeres death, dr. F.W. Stapel rounded out the source materials in the original way, that is to say with the same extensive notes and appendices.¹⁵

What does the Corpus diplomaticum tell us about the frequency in which treaties were concluded? Between 1602 and 1650 there were three to four contracts concluded each year with Asiatic princes; in the third quarter of the 17th century this number doubled to six a year, and in the last quarter of the century the average was roughly eleven treaties each year. At the end of the seventeenth century, the situation stabilized: the VOC assumed sovereignty over a number of small states in the archipelago and as a result did not need to conclude any new treaties.

Sultanates like Ternate and Tidore in the Moluccas became feudal states. The powerful kingdoms of Mataram and Banten in Java recognized the VOC as patron and even permitted forts and a permanent Dutch garrison in their capitals.

Curiously enough, most of the VOC’s diplomatic activity in the first half of the eighteenth century was directed towards relations with empires and kingdoms where the VOC as a foreign trader with a local trading factory was virtually powerless, specifically such kingdoms as Persia and the empire of the Great Mughal. This diplomacy was mainly concerned with the conclusion of treaties with local rulers, but occasionally the Company felt obliged to send expensive tribute missions to Ispahahan or the Mughal court whenever a new sovereign had succeeded to the throne of the empire.

In the last part of the Corpus diplomaticum which spanned the period 1753-1799, the Company in India became a victim of French-English rivalry. The Dutch share of the Indian trade
was impaired by this struggle and thus the Company gradually lost its influence on the subcontinent.16 “Although the Company in India likes to represent itself as a local prince, this principedom must still live through its merchants,” a contemporary wryly noted.17

In contrast to historians who have underestimated the importance of the diplomatic relations of the VOC, Dutch legal scholars have in the past paid more attention to this subject, as one might expect in the homeland of Grotius and Van Vollenhoven. In the early 1950s Professor Han Resink of the University of Jakarta made use of the *Corpus diplomaticum* to show that many Indonesian states in the nineteenth century were still independent kingdoms in a strict judicial sense. Yet, as Hoetink has correctly noted he may have over-intellectualized this by strictly interpreting the treaties within a European legal context.18 That is really remarkable because as a born and bred *anak Yogya*, Resink, as no other could have, had an eye for Javanese ritual and the particular ways in which Indonesian princes observed treaties. L.W. Alders, a student of Resink, wrote a dissertation study on negotiation-clauses in the international jurisdiction between Indonesian kingdoms and the VOC. He demonstrated how arbitration - the friendly resolution of differences - occupied an important place in the international relations of Batavia with the encircling kingdoms in the archipelago. It describes not only the differences between Batavia and indigenous rulers in the region, but often also the mutual differences between indigenous rulers in which the High Government was called to act as mediator - an important point that not only suggests the dominating position enjoyed by the VOC in Batavia but also the degree in which Batavia had become part of its, political surroundings.19

But there is more. In pursuance of a verdict of the International Tribunal in the Hague in a dispute between Portugal and India, the jurist C.G. Alexandrovicz later wrote a general overview of the history of international law in 17th and 18th century Asia.20 In this seminal work of legal history, he poses questions like: how did Europeans classify the Asian rulers and empires with whom they came into contact, and what kinds of agreements were made between them? As we already have seen in the case of negotiations, these treaties covered not only trading privileges but
some were also complex with agreements regarding the supply of products, the lending of military assistance and so on. At the same time, Alexandrovicz also reviewed the forms of diplomatic representation.\footnote{21}

Looking at the body of work on the diplomacy of the VOC, we can establish that apart from this judicial research, no comparative historical research has been carried out on European diplomacy in Asia. Furthermore there would seem to be a need for broader research on the ritual and the framework of protocol that gave shape to the conduct of foreign relations. Ritual and protocol often served as a face-saving device between parties. They bridged the gap between a perfect world order and the world of everyday practice. For such a study, we would have to look at an enormous quantity of material on the ambassadors’ reports in the VOC archive, a large number of which has since been published.

To illustrate my point, an interesting case study by Lodewijk Wagenaar shows that following the conclusion of the peace treaty in 1766 between the VOC and the King of Kandy in Ceylon an agreement was reached regarding the reception of ambassadors on the basis of mutual equality. The king later reneged on this agreement because he felt affronted by the lack of proper respect due to him by VOC emissaries. This lack was considered to have affected his own dominant position in court. After endless haggling between both parties, the ambassador of the VOC decided to kneel as had always been done in the past when a Dutch emissary was offering letters as a tributary to the king - with the letter in a dish placed on his head - and he did this at least thirteen times consecutively.\footnote{22}

It was the letter which mattered not the self-importance of the messenger, the emissary. After all, much greater ceremonial value was attached to letters in the Asiatic diplomatic tradition than in Europe. The official letter of one Malay ruler to another played a central role. The \textit{Surat Emas}, or the “golden letter,” served as a barometer of mutual relations. Wilkinson has given a good description of how Malay rulers paid considerable attention to the wording of official correspondence. The composition of such a letter took place in deliberation with counsellors; every
word was carefully balanced. The writing of the letter was elevated to a real art form by them: the recipient had to be flattered in such a way as not to diminish the status of the sender himself. In the VOC archive, countless numbers of beautiful gold-leafed specimens of such diplomatic correspondence are still preserved today.

It is not possible to present a blueprint, a complete agenda, for a comparative historical research of the European diplomacy in early modern Asia, within the scope of this paper. However, it is possible to offer a number of suggestions for further study. Primarily, it is important to trace how Europeans defined their position in the Early Modern Asian setting. According to the general instructions of 1650 they made a distinction between three categories of government: first, regions that were taken through the VOC’s “own conquest;” second, kingdoms where exclusive trade contracts with local official guaranteed a monopolistic position and, finally, those regions where the VOC was allowed to trade thanks to trade contracts with local rulers. The Dutch also tried, for better or for worse, to differentiate among the four categories of Asiatic rulers with whom they had diplomatic relations. Imperial rulers like, for example, the Great Mughal of India, the Shah of Persia, the Emperor of China and the Shogun of Japan fell into the first category; the second group was composed of powerful sovereign princes whose sovereignty was over surrounding vassal-states but who were themselves tributary princes to the emperors of the first category like, for example, the King of Siam; the third category was made up of sovereign princes whose loyalties shifted from one suzerain prince to another; and fourth and last were the vassals that swayed between sovereign and non-sovereign feudal status like, for example the jagirdars and zamindars in India.

Was there one overarching Asian political tradition on which Europeans could stitch these labels? Alexandrovicz was of the opinion that all empires east of the Ottoman Empire and to the west of China were established on the same Hinduistic foundation of a “greater Indian cultural sphere.” His very global approach, in which “Great Tradition” and “Little Tradition” are heaped together in such a way that no consideration is made for the local adat and does not even discuss the wave of state formation processes taking place in the whole of Asia in the 17th and 18th century,
obviously requires more precision.  

It would appear more useful then, to differentiate between at least five cultural spheres or “world orders,” as Ferdinand Braudel would call them: China and Japan in the Far East, Southeast Asia in all of its diversity, Mugal India, the Persian cultural sphere, and finally the Ottoman Empire, which I shall leave outside of this examination.

The phrase “world order”, whenever it is applied to Southeast Asia, appears to be almost a contradiction in terms. One sees a division in the multitude of states and small states that came into existence. On the one hand, there are empires organized concentrically around agrarian societies; on the other there are trade oriented port polities with an unstable *primus inter pares*-administration, and in certain cases such as for instance the kingdom of Siam, a combination of the two models. However that may be, all of these states had one thing in common: they were characterized by low population density with a strong emphasis on personal alliances and local legal traditions. Geographical circumstances determined the format of the state and clearly defined borders were absent in general. Within this chaotic Southeast Asian world order, where changing alliances were the order of the day and where there was continuously talk of change in the pecking order between princes, in this area the regional diplomacy blossomed, and as a function of that, such states had to advance their own status and to collect information, even to spy, on their neighbors.

Further westwards across the Gulf of Bengal, is the Indian subcontinent. Also there, we come into contact with rich variations in the patterns of state formation: rival Hindu kingdoms in the south - with a clear difference between *schenkagie*- and *conqueste*-regions and in the north and middle and the steady expansive Islamic Mugal Empire, where time after time expensive emissaries were sent. The Persian Safavid empire, sandwiched between Mugal India and the Ottoman Empire, formed its own world order as well, but just as René Barendse has commented, it was more a self-conscious center for the dissemination of culture rather than a sacred center. The high-ranking merchants sent to Isphahan as ambassadors were also among the most educated *taalmannen*, or
language specialists, in the Company.

This was *grosso modo* the confusing world in which the VOC servant had to make his way. The fact that the VOC did not enter the Asiatic arena in an unprejudiced state of mind also complicated matters further. Dutch sailors brought with them to Asia not only their own personal belongings, but also friendships, their alliances, and their enmities as well. More dangerous still, they clashed with their arch-enemies, Spain and Portugal all over Asia. This environment led to situations where the VOC became involved in protracted struggles with the Portuguese wherever they went, as in the Moluccas and the Malaka peninsula; or they entered into alliances with local princes against the Iberians as in Ceylon and Malabar, or they joined punitive action by local rulers as they did during the Shimabara rebellion in Japan. The conquest of Portuguese fortresses on the island of Ceylon in particular, and those on the south coast of India, contemporary critics declared, were the work “[...] of a great and ambitious king rather than merchants who look only to their profits.” Wherever the VOC engaged in large, ruthlessly violent, well-organized military campaigns, they were more likely directed against the Portuguese than against local Asian rulers.28

As a result of their show of power, the Dutch were seen by certain Asiatic princes as an attractive party, not only as potential allies against the Portuguese but also as a seapower who could offer support through the transport of troops by ship during campaigns against other Asian princes.29 Thus the Company now and then supported the punitive maritime expeditions of the king of Thailand against his disobedient Malay neighbor in the South.

It is all too easy to become lost amongst the many confusing and abstract concepts of Asian diplomacy. In conclusion, therefore, we will follow in the footsteps of two VOC servants, both of whom were excellent diplomats.30 Both possessed the requisite language knowledge and insight of local customs and practices, and applied these, as we shall see, in an optimal way.

First there was François Caron, a native of Brussels, who rose through the ranks in Japan, Ceylon, Taiwan, and Batavia until he fell out of favour as Director General and was recalled to the Netherlands in 1650 by the VOC to become its Director-General. Due to Caron’s composed attitude
vis a vis overbearing Japanese power-wielding, the Dutch, unlike other Europeans, had not been barred from Japan. When the youngster Caron arrived in 1619 in the capacity of cabin boy, Dutch-Japanese trade was quite insignificant because the Portuguese had risen to such a dominant position in Nagasaki. However, it quickly became clear that the Shogun, for a number of reasons, wanted to push back outside influence, as well as Japan’s dependence upon foreign trade. The Catholic faith, first introduced by the Portuguese, was seen by this worldly ruler, furthermore, as a direct threat to his power base. As Caron was to describe in detail in his *Mochtig koninkrijk van Japan* (Mighty Kingdom of Japan), all around him he witnessed cruel anti-Christian persecutions. It did not embarrass the Dutch to play up the Japanese hatred directed against the catholic mission and they conveyed the impression that they, like the Japanese, were also involved in a ferocious struggle against the Pope maintaining that “[...] everywhere in all Dutch cities the Catholics stabilized their churches, and sought through their creed., which they were spreading everywhere, to incorporate our land (the Low Countries) with cunning subtlety.”

In 1638 the Company Chief Nicolaas Coeckebecker made a ship available to the Shogun to help bombard the Christian rebels at Shimabara castle. Even after that ineffective gesture of assistance, the Hollanders had no inkling of what might hang over their heads when the Portuguese were kicked out of Japan. Instructive is the answer Caron received from the Japanese imperial council in 1639 to his careful question whether it would be a good idea for the “King of Holland” to send an ambassador sometime to strengthen trade relations further. The Japanese side felt no such need for that, “since real ambassadors spoke about royal matters and not about trade.” This implied the full submission of these merchants to the state’s regulations.

The real test came in 1640 when the Shogun issued a decree to immediately tear down the Dutch warehouses in Hirado because he had learned that the Hollanders had had the insolence on the building’s completion to engrave a date of the Christian calendar *Anno Dovini 1639* on its gable. Caron carried out this order without question and replied “What His Majesty faithfully ordered, we shall punctually execute.” To this, the Japanese interpreter sighed with relief: “I am
surprised and heartened by that short and resolute answer since no request or complaint has been brought forth - which is not quite what we expect from Christians. Now we are spared much trouble and bloodshed.” Shortly afterwards Caron heard that the Grand Inquisitor had received orders that the Hollanders in Hirado be made “a head shorter” at the least sign of resistance to the Shogun’s order. That the Gentlemen XVII had also come to the same conclusion - that total subservience to the Japanese rule was their only option appears in their instruction that

[...] Company officials frequenting that narrow minded Empire annually above all must go armed with modesty, humility, politeness, and friendship being always very obliging in regard to that nation Japan), so that their hearts (so it is hoped) shall in the end be won over to us.35

Paravicini, the other protagonist of Dutch diplomacy in Asia, ushers us into the Indonesian Archipelago one century later. He was sent on a mission to the port polity of Banjarmasin, a town rich in pepper, on the southern coast of Borneo, a political arena entirely different from that of the strict but orderly Japan. At the court of Banjarmasin Paravicini did not behave as a meek and docile foreign merchant but rather played the role of orang branie - a fearless champion - when he was threatened by the Sultan’s bodyguards while appearing as the VOC’s envoy at his court.36

Because Paravicini refused to be impressed by their game of bluff, the sultan sent his warriors away and ordered armed concubines to appear, who then encircled the envoy. Paravicini did not lose his nerve. however. “These girls are just as dangerous as those men,” he yelled above the noise of the crowd of shrieking shrews, “[at least] if one makes inappropriate and too excessive use of them.” When the Sultan heard this, he said laughing: “Soengoeh, Soengoeh, commissaris ada orang terlaloe bisa.” “Indeed, indeed, the commissioner is a man of great experience!” Paravicini replied that it would be difficult to send a different sort of emissary to so sensible a prince as the Sultan. As a result, his life was saved and he got what he wanted: a few days later the treaty was signed.

These two examples demonstrate how early modern diplomats confronted with rather startling situations knew how to find the right solution by skilfully appraising the local conditions. Let us
now look back at Batavia, the nerve center of the Company in Asia.

In Batavia too, there existed a detailed protocol for the reception of ambassadors with letters from indigenous princes. The ceremony, in all its splendor, was in no way different from that of the neighboring princes.³⁷ Still, the Asiatic representatives of those princes sometimes underwent a culture shock. Valentijn told of an Ethiopian envoy who was invited to be present at the ceremony whereby Governor-General Camphuis handed over his paraphernalia - the keys to the city and the keys to the fortress - to his successor. The envoy could not conceal his surprise. “This transfer of power would not happen so easily in my country., but would cost thousands of heads, before someone would be able to reach such a high ranking post,” his translator announced. With that remark he hit the nail square on the head. He could not have better characterized the difference between Western and Eastern political customs.

The entire administration, the bureaucratic structure of the Dutch presence in Asia, was geared towards the creation of an ongoing concern, of a permanent presence, an oasis in the middle of the unpredictability that characterized the political atmosphere of the region. Opinions were divided regarding that tangible presence, however. The Moors of the Coromandel coast in India likened the Dutch to snakes “[...] who have their heads in everything, and wriggle their whole bodies in as well, and it is their nature that once they have gotten something, they hang on to it never again to let it go.”³⁸

The great Chinese ship owners of Amoy, on the other hand, held a completely different opinion of the Governor-General and his Council in Batavia. In the personal letters that they sent every year with their junks to the Governor-General in Batavia, they idealized the King of Pa(taweiya) like a sturdy rock in the middle of the turbulent South Seas. “Those living far away and those close by your land proclaim their respect to you. Merchant ships sail to and fro. Batavia serves as an intersection for both land and sea transport. Thou, almighty Master, protect the lands of the South Seas. You maintain your laws and regulations. Your benevolence stretches out as far in the [Far] East. We bathe in your favour which, like the sun that shines over the Three Holy
Mountains, there is no spot your kafit does not reach.” Without doubt nice words to hear from a stranger!

In this article, I have focused on Dutch-Asiatic diplomatic relations in the early modern period and with it hopefully I have shed new light on European diplomatic relations in Asia. The paper is intended to be a plea for a new approach to an aspect of Asian history based on Western and Asian sources. It is an invitation, in imitation of the “New Military History,” to write a “New Diplomatic History” that above all addresses the political, economic and social context in which international relations were maintained in early modern Asia.
Notes


2On 30 January 1637 Van Twist was sent there to discuss the revictualling of the fleet, and to inquire about the possibility of concluding an alliance against the Portuguese. For a description of the painting, see Norbert Middelkoop, ed., *The Golden Age of Dutch Art: Seventeenth century Paintings from the Rijksmuseum and Australian Collections* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1997).


4"The British,” he explains, “are like a fast running stream[ :]they are persistent, energetic, and irresistible in their spirit. Whenever they really want to attain something, they will use violence to do so. The Dutch, on the other hand, are very clever, skillful, patient and calm. Whenever possible, they would rather attain their goals through persuasion than through force of arms.” Cited in B.H.M. Vlekke, *Geschiedenis van den Indischen archipel* (Roermond, 1947), p. 257.

5For a definition of partnership and equality, see the paragraph entitled “Partnership of beheerst conflict?” in J. van Goor, *De Nederlandse koloniën: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse expansie, 1600-1975* (’s-Gravenhage, no date), pp. 83 and 91.

6C. van Vollenhoven, *De drie treden van het volkenrecht* (’s-Gravenhage, 1918), p. 2. The cradle of modern diplomacy, Europe, was divided in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) in status between the so-called equivalent states, which concluded treaties with each other, and small states, as is illustrated by Heringa’s formal but often quite amusing study *De eer en hoogheid van de staat “regarding the place of the Republic in the diplomatic life of the seventeenth century.” This difference in status was not only limited to states but to the citizens of those states as well. This is particularly evident when the Stadhouder-King, William III, was forced to architecturally alter his palace at Rijswijk by knocking holes in the walls to provide more entrance ways into the great hall, thus allowing the ambassadors of England, France, and Spain to enter the room simultaneously. In this way, all the participants of the peace talks there were assured of the same status.


9Manuscript H45, KITLV. Patriase Missive of 19 September 1633. The place meant here is Surate in Northwest India
“Most contracts from the early period were found in the so called Contract-Books, more formally called Register van alle contracten, verbonden, en traclaten van vrede en commertie met de inlandsche Coningen en Prinsen etc. wegens de generale Nederlandsche Compagnie gemaakt en besloten (VOC 4777-4783). But during the course of the seventeenth century and particularly in the eighteenth century, the Governor-general and council no longer sent complete returns to the Netherlands. Copies of the most important contracts concluded during the latter period can however all be found in the Overgekomen brieven en papieren series. In addition, Heeres, the compiler of the Corpus diplomaticum Neelando-Indicum, found still more material in a separate but very incomplete Archive of the High Government of Batavia (1602-1827) in the Algemeen Rijksarchief. Stapel, his successor, received more important additional information from the Landsarchief te Batavia/Jakarta. See Heeres, Corpus diplomaticum, Part 11, XIX.

10 Vlekke, Geschiedenis van den Indischen archipel, p. 257.

11 Heeres, Corpus diplomaticum, Part 1, p. XVI.

12 Ibidem, p. XVIII.

13 Heeres, Corpus diplomaticum, Part 11, pp. XXI-XXII.

14 If it was not for the assistance of professor W.Ph. Coolhaas on the last part which finally appeared in 1955, he would never have wanted to go through the ordeal of finishing it.

15 In 1753, the Company gave up the role of protector of the small coastal cities of Malabar in the south of India with the conclusion of the treaty with Travancore. The treaty concluded six years later with Robert Clive marked the end of the VOC as a power in Coromandel. See Stapel, Corpus diplomaticum, Part VI, p. XV.


17 “Whenever historical thought does not represent the depiction of earlier reality but rather gives form to historical material, then in principle it should not be allowed to make use of ideas which in the period described did not yet consciously exist.” H. Hoetink, Historische rechtsbeschouwing (Amsterdam: Rectoraatsrede GU, 1949), pp. 19-20; cited in L.W. Alders, International rechtsspraak, p.10; J. van Goor, “Nederlanders en de pre-koloniale staat” in Kooplieden, predikanten en bestuursders overzee, p. 145.

18 Alders indicates moreover that in the archipelago the Company drew up the treaties it wished to conclude couched in its own diplomatic terminology, while in treaties with Persia for example, a terminology was employed that had hardly anything in common with the European sense of justice, like for example “A command has been issued to the world in order to be obeyed, namely that [etc.]” in Alders, Internationale rechtsspraak, p. 6.


26 “Contemporary International Law supposes permanent borders but in this [early modern] period, borders were fluid things.” Van Vollenhoven once noted with regards to early modern Europe. This observation was even more valid in the cases of Southeast Asia and Southern India, regions with porous frontiers.

27 Barendse, Koningen, compagniën en kapers, p. 48. Although the Persian court understood that in ultimo the sovereign power rested in the hands of States-General and not with the High Government in Batavia, the empire was too far away to maintain direct diplomatic contact with Europe. As for the permanent European ambassadors that were present at the court, most were adventurers, like for example, the Shirley brothers whose exploits are so wonderfully described by Niels Steensgaard For details see N. Steensgaard, The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century (Chicago, 1973); and cf. Barendse, Koningen, compagniën en kapers, pp. 46-47.

28 In the end the radical change in the power relationship in Europe during the eighteenth century, and in particular the rivalry between England and France that was fought out in the Indian subcontinent among other places, would really harm the Dutch presence in India.

29 When he was first sent to the court at Tonkin in 1637, Carel Hartsinck, to his surprise, was received with much pomp and circumstance by the prince and his retinue seated on elephants, and presented with wonderful gifts, adopted as the prince’s son and told: “We have 300,000 soldiers, 2,000 elephants, 10,000 war-horses, 1,000 galleys, 1,000 muskets, 1,000 metal cannon [...] (I will keep this short) and was then sent back to Batavia with a letter in which it was requested that three ships and 200 picked artillerists be reserved to accompany a punitive expedition against the inhabitants of the south of Vietnam, “whose life and behaviour is doomed and who do all good and precious things wrong. Their hearts are full of guilefulness, because they are like the beasts of the earth. They behave in unorthodox ways, and do not obey me.” F. Valentijn, Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien, Vol. III b (Dordrecht, 1724-26), p. 17.

30 There were plenty of Ugly European merchants or diplomats; we do not need to spend too much time on them because there is little to learn from their misconduct. Time and time again they were punished for their arrogant and often stupid behavior. One example will suffice, however. In 1602, when the Company sent its first envoy, Sebald de Weeld, to the court of Ceylon, his drunken, impolite behavior in the presence of the princess - who he publicly called “a prostitute and bordello
“whore” - cost him his life according to Valentijn. I will also skip the spectacular embassies that the Company sent over the centuries to the courts of the Emperor at Peking, Delhi, and Isphahan, embassies that due to their importance were entrusted to taalmannen (linguists) higher officials in the Company who through their abilities were well versed in the local vernacular, culture and the Persian decorum of these courts. Cf. Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw OostIndiën*, Vol. Va, p. 108.

Japanese Dutch relations reached their lowest point in 1628 when a conflict between the Dutch administration on Taiwan and Japanese merchants broke out leading to a hostage drama and an embargo on all trade with the Dutch. After the Governor of Formosa, Pieter Nuyts, was made a scapegoat, relations were restored thanks in large part to Caron’s efforts.


"There has been at times great difficulty with their ambassador [Nuyts], [and] with a second one, affairs will not necessarily go any smoother [...] Why should their ambassador come to express gratitude for the fact that the Dutch Company’s merchants live and prosper in Japan? Such business does not merit an ambassador; We only deem kings and potentates of substance, when they speak of royal business and not of merchant business, when they request assistance in war or offer assistance. Sending another ambassador will only result in trouble.” Historiographical Institute, ed., *Diaries kept by the Heads of the Dutch Factory in Japan*, Original Text Selection 1, Vol. IV (Tokyo: Historiographical Institute, 1981); 26 July 1639, pp. 60-61.

Several years later Caron as Director-General also knew how to solve another diplomatic problem, when it was hinted by the factory head in Nagasaki that the Prince of Orange should demonstrate his thanks to the Shogun by sending an emissary because the latter had shown leniency towards the Dutch crew of the ship Breskens, which had illegally visited a bay in Northern Japan. This fascinating story has recently been analyzed in detail by R. Hesselink in his doctoral dissertation. Caron sent an ambassador from Batavia (not from Holland) who was so sick that a coffin was sent along on board the ship. The court officials of the shogun noticed to their relief that this envoy, who on the way in fact breathed his last breath, and was promptly mummified, was sent to Nagasaki without a personal letter from the Prince of Orange on him and concluded they were only dealing with “the death of a salesman”. His deputy could therefore be treated as a simple representative.

Valentijn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiff* Part V-2, p. 165. Modesty, humility and obedience; As early as 163 8, the Gentlemen XVII had written: “Modesty consists of prudent behaviour and circumspection in all transactions; Humility means that one shall never raise jealousy with haughty actions towards this easily offended nation, but will always behave oneself as the lower one in rank; Obedience, means that we should not resist against their laws, without being too timid, or too indulgent always trying to maintain the Company’s rights in a discrete manner [...]”

Angry voices whispered to the Sultan: “Does Your Majesty not see that the Company has gained a foothold everywhere through use of force, has sent princes into exile, has kicked them from their thrones, and has treated them like slaves? Does Your Majesty not know what happened in Bantam and Java? The Dutch Company shall eat the egg and leave Your Majesty with the shell like it does everywhere.”

In a wonderful study about the three ambassadorial visits that the Ethiopian envoy, KhodJa Murad, made to Batavia between 1673 and 1697, van Donzel illustrates what such a visit looked like from the other side. E. van Donzel, *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia, 1642-1700* (Nederlands Historisch Archeologisch Instituut, 1979).