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Instructions, Feedback, and Local Adaptation: Dutch Asian Expansion and Diplomatic Decision-Making in the Early Seventeenth Century

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Abstract

This article examines the diplomatic decision-making mechanism and evolutionary trajectory of the Dutch East India Company during its expansion in Asia in the early seventeenth century. It argues that VOC diplomatic practices were consistently anchored in commercial monopoly, establishing a dynamic response mechanism characterized by headquarters directives–Asian feedback–localized adaptation. Through five sets of instructions issued between 1609 and 1650, the States-General and Heeren XVII guided diplomatic strategy from early flexible alliances and local adaptation toward aggressive monopolization, ultimately establishing a mature, hierarchical diplomatic framework by 1650. However, a persistent divergence existed between the grand strategies of European headquarters such as pursuing an Anglo-Dutch alliance and relying on idealized local treaties and the micro-realities of the Asian frontline. Facing complex dynamics with local polities like Ternate and fierce rivalry with the English East India Company, frontline Asian officials adopted pragmatic strategies of deterrence, division, and exclusion, leveraging sustained information feedback to exert a bottom-up influence that reshaped top-level directives. Ultimately, the early VOC diplomatic model was neither a rigid Eurocentric imposition nor a static blueprint, but a dynamic, pragmatic process driven by continuous feedback loops and localized adaptation.

Keywords

Dutch East India Company, colonial diplomatic interactions, commercial monopoly, hierarchical diplomacy

1. Introduction

Relying on the strength of native Southeast Asian polities to pursue commercial interests and military assistance was a fundamental principle upheld by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from its inception. The company was established with the objective of serving as an armed force against Spain and Portugal, launching offensives against the Iberian powers in Asia to keep the Spanish monarch and his colonial officials on high alert. This strategy forced them to divert precious financial resources toward fortifying strategic strongholds in the *Estado da Índia* and the Spanish Philippines, thereby curtailing their war expenditures in Europe [1]. Article 35 of the 1602 Charter establishing the United Company stipulated a single core principle for entering into treaties with local rulers in the East Indies: to maintain the company's stability in the region. Treaty-making thus became a vehicle for localization, rendering the security, order, and trade development of local outposts a shared responsibility between local rulers and the company [2]. By forming alliances with

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indigenous polities, the Dutch could engage in direct trade while pooling forces to strike against the Portuguese and Spanish. Considering the VOC's subsequent actions in both Europe and Southeast Asia, treaty-making and alliance-building also served as a vital means of establishing legitimacy and justification for their conduct in Southeast Asia. On March 6, 1603, the States General informed the representatives of the Company of Spain's preparations for war in the East Indies, advising the company to dispatch a powerful, well-equipped, and fully manned fleet to defend freedom of trade, strike at the enemy, and safeguard the security of trading partners [3].

On the surface, the deliberations at this meeting appeared to emphasize safeguarding the Company's trade in the East Indies from Spanish threats; at a deeper level, however, they used the banner of protecting trading partners to integrate the defense of allies into national-level military deployment goals. This conferred a mantle of legitimacy upon the East India Company's armed actions, framing them as the fulfillment of treaty obligations and the maintenance of collective security. Under this banner, the Company's military conduct was no longer mere commercial self-defense, but became a legitimate instrument for executing national diplomatic and strategic objectives. Moreover, the military operations launched by the Dutch East India Company against its European rivals made it an appealing partner to certain Asian monarchs—who viewed the Dutch not only as potential allies against the Portuguese, but also as a naval power capable of providing maritime transport support during military campaigns among Asian rulers [4]. Consequently, as both an objective necessity for commercial expansion and an essential component of national strategy, the Heeren XVII at the Dutch headquarters consistently emphasized, from the Company's very inception, the implementation of an alliance policy in the East Indies, while insisting on respect for local traditions and etiquette in diplomatic engagements.

2. Instructions from the European Headquarters

Following the establishment of the United Company in 1602, the supreme command in the East Indies was held in rotation by individual fleet commanders over the subsequent years, rendering the implementation of a coherent policy virtually impossible. Consequently, Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge, a former commander of an East Indies fleet, reflected upon his return to the Netherlands on the numerous flaws in the Company's strategy in the East Indies and proposed the creation of a High Government composed of a Governor-General and a council to direct the Company's operations in Asia [5]. In 1609, Pieter Both was appointed as the first Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company. Dispatched alongside his commission was the first set of instructions issued by the board of directors, the Heeren XVII, to the High Government in the East Indies. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Heeren XVII issued five sets of general directives to the High Government in the chartered territory—in 1609, 1613, 1617, 1632, and 1650—aimed at providing a master framework for the Company's operations in Asia [6, 7].

The Instructions of 1609 explicitly distinguished between internal administrative affairs and the management of order, offering concrete recommendations for various operational domains. The approach to diplomatic affairs within these instructions can be summarized into two primary directions: first, strategic recommendations for confronting hostile European powers and commercial rivals; second, guiding principles for managing relations with Asian rulers [8]. The diplomatic guidelines of 1609 established an overarching principle centered on commercial interests: prioritizing the expansion of influence through intelligence, alliances, and diplomatic engagement, while avoiding open disruptions to outward peace. At the same time, differentiated strategies were deployed according to the target polity's strength and strategic value. For polities occupying strategic choke points but possessing weaker strength such as the Malukan polities, the objective was firm control, primarily achieved by establishing outposts and fortresses. For strategically crucial yet hard-to-control polities such as Banten, the strategy was to maintain surface peace while covertly countering them and winning over their potential rivals such as Jayakarta. For regional powers such as Siam, the emphasis was placed on establishing and maintaining alliances and friendship, aiming to secure political backing and a stable trading environment. This practice aligned with the improvisational nature of colonial contact, wherein outsiders had to adapt to cultural and political dynamics to engage in interactions on equal terms [9]. As Peter Borschberg has pointed out, the Dutch began directing their strategic and commercial attention toward several key areas in insular and peninsular Southeast Asia. They recognized that these regions were controlled by numerous small kingdoms whose rulers, despite possessing weak administrative structures and sometimes fragmented territories, exercised full sovereignty. In the eyes of the Dutch, these relatively weak polities and their subordinate rulers were susceptible to the political and commercial expansion of Iberian powers and

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risked being drawn into an Iberian order in Southeast Asia. Consequently, regions possessing both commercial and strategic value—such as the Malay Peninsula (especially Johor), Sumatra, the Banda Islands, the Moluccas, Timor, and Southern India—were regarded by the Dutch as so-called *frontline regions [1]*.

Among these guidelines, Article 8 established the principle that no fixed orders could be given, conferring upon the Governor-General supreme discretion to respond flexibly to complex Asian situations based on intelligence, thereby enabling the implementation of localized strategies tailored to local conditions. This principle was first and foremost an expedient measure dictated by information barriers. As C.R. Boxer noted, regarding regions where the Company held no territorial rights or exclusive privileges through treaties—which comprised the major portion of the Company's operational sphere—the headquarters lacked sufficient information to issue concrete commands and could only authorize Company officials to act through conciliation and accommodation [10]. As the Company gathered and compiled more intelligence to send back to Amsterdam, the Dutch headquarters was gradually able to issue specific directives on certain matters. This strategy of flexible diplomacy, emphasizing an organic combination of pragmatism and dynamic adjustment, can be described as grounded in the concept of cultural relativism [8]. The framework of diplomatic interaction outlined in the 1609 Instructions set the tone for the Dutch East India Company's expansion in Asia over the following decades, and the diplomatic sections of the directives sent by the Dutch headquarters to Governor-General Gerard Reynst in 1613 followed this framework almost in its entirety [6].

The provisions concerning diplomatic interactions in the 1617 instructions are concentrated in Articles 45 and 46. Consistent with the previous two sets of instructions, the Heeren XVII still maintained that peaceful relations should be upheld and war against Asian rulers should be avoided [7]. Unlike the earlier two versions, however, the 1617 instructions recommended a conciliatory strategy when engaging with independent Asian princes, while adopting a hardline stance towards the Spanish and the Portuguese, and took the initiative to deploy regular, standardized patrol fleets [7, 8, 11]. This shift was closely tied to the appointment of Jan Pieterszoon Coen as Governor-General in 1617. His predecessor, Laurens Reael, had refused to carry out the headquarters' order to expel all foreigners from the Maluku Islands, which greatly disappointed the Dutch board of directors [12]. In 1617, Coen, whose radical ideas had long been favored by the Dutch headquarters, assumed the position of Governor-General, marking the entry of the VOC's policy in the East Indies into a radical phase of expansion.

Ever since Coen established Batavia as the Asian headquarters of the Company in 1619, repeated assaults on Portuguese-held Malacca and Macau, as well as blockades of Goa and Manila, failed to secure a decisive upper hand. Consequently, the Dutch shifted their focus toward consolidating control over territories already in their possession. In 1632, in the instructions dispatched by the European headquarters to the newly appointed Governor-General, Hendrik Brouwer, and officials in the East Indies, the Company explicitly mandated the maintenance of peace with Siam, Ternate, and Ambon, while simultaneously directing them to be prepared to defend the Company's rights and interests through force if necessary [7]. Unlike the 1617 Instructions, those of 1632 contained no stipulations prohibiting trade by foreign merchants, mentioning only the need to remain vigilant against English and Danish traders who might disrupt Company commerce [7]. This reflected a moderation of the Company's East Indies strategy compared to the radical approach during Coen's tenure, representing a pragmatic compromise born out of the impossibility of completely excluding Asian merchants from the spice trade [13]. Nevertheless, the overall policy still exhibited a trend of transition from moderation to a hardline position.

The 1650 Instructions represent arguably the richest source for examining overseas diplomatic patterns during the era of the Heeren XVII, remaining recognized as the foundational basis for Company operations within its chartered territory until as late as 1746 [8]. Their most salient value lies in explicitly constructing a diplomatic framework for the East Indies, wherein the Company's diplomatic counterparts were categorized into three distinct types: regions where the Company exercised sovereign rights (the Banda Islands and their dependencies), regions where it held exclusive contracts (the Maluku Islands and Ambon), and regions where it had to engage in trade on an equal footing with other parties [7]. This classification signals the maturity of the company's top-level policy design for Southeast Asia. Based on the varying degrees of political influence and control it exerted across Asian regions, the company structured its diplomatic engagement into a tiered, differentiated network of governance — spanning direct sovereign rule, exclusive treaty monopoly, and equal commercial exchange — thereby forming a clear hierarchical diplomatic system.

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On the whole, policy directives issued from Europe were far from rigid or dogmatic. They evolved continuously with the accumulation of intelligence and shifts in the regional situation, providing foundational principles for the company's diplomatic interactions in the Malay world. As Feddersen observed, the VOC's diplomatic model in its early period was neither Eurocentric nor legally dogmatic, nor was it the static pattern repeatedly emphasized in traditional historiography; instead, it exhibited systematically non-Eurocentric characteristics, remaining pragmatically oriented and highly dynamic [8].

3. Feedback and Adaptation in Asian Engagements

Relying on fortresses, naval patrols, and exacting treaties, the Dutch East India Company carried out the directives issued by its Amsterdam headquarters [14, 15]. However, these five diplomatic instructions spanned nearly half a century, with intervals ranging from as short as four years to over eighteen years. Coupled with the repeated fluctuations in alliances with various polities, it becomes evident that theoretical guidance from the Dutch headquarters often struggled to align seamlessly with the complex realities on the ground in Asia. Company officials in Asia had long recognized the inevitable disconnect between the macro-strategy of headquarters and the micro-realities of the Asian frontier [16]. Consequently, whenever divergences arose, they were required on the one hand to exercise pragmatic flexibility on the frontlines, and on the other to submit timely reports to supplement local realities that the European leadership had overlooked or failed to fully grasp.

3.1 Perception of and Feedback on Ternate

How to manage relations with Ternate was a long-standing subject of debate between VOC officials in Asia and the Dutch headquarters. Ever since Matelieff formulated his strategic blueprint for controlling the Maluku Islands in 1607 [17], consolidating friendly ties with Ternate remained a central mandate in the instructions issued by headquarters to Asian officials, with successive Governors-General carrying out the directive to win over Ternate. This did not mean, however, that Asian officials executed this instruction dogmatically; instead, they continuously observed, reflected, and provided feedback from the frontlines, thereby retroactively driving the refinement of headquarters' directives.

While executing the policy of co-opting Ternate, the first Governor-General, Pieter Both, developed his own independent insights. He regarded the Ternatans' friendliness as insincere, stemming merely from their fear of the Spanish [16]. Refusing to place full trust in the Ternatans, Both saw through the underlying reality of mutual exploitation—a nuance overlooked by the European high command. Both's report had already exposed Ternate's posture as a false friend, subtly suggesting that the Heeren XVII prepare early for potential confrontation. Yet the European directors seemed to have no immediate intention of treating Ternate as an adversary. Indeed, while the instructions issued to the Governor-General in 1613 acknowledged the insincerity of peace with Banten, they made no mention whatsoever of what stance to adopt toward Ternate [6]. This undoubtedly revealed a disconnect between headquarters' macro-strategy and the localized understanding of Asian officials, even if it did not culminate in a strategic miscalculation.

Although Asian officials had recognized as early as 1617 that the Company possessed only modest authority in Ambon and its dependencies, while core spice-producing regions such as Maluku proper remained under the jurisdiction of the King of Ternate [18], the Dutch headquarters' lenient policy toward Ternate nevertheless persisted into the 1620s. After the Dutch East India Company secured absolute control over nutmeg through bloody means in 1623, the early Dutch slogan—that they came only for trade and to destroy Portuguese rule, not to conquer land—collapsed of its own accord, as their treatment of local populations upon invading lands proved even worse than that of the Portuguese [19]. Consequently, the Sultan of Ternate united his dependencies and allies in an attempt to monopolize the population, suzerainty, and commercial profits of the Maluku Islands [16]. Asian officials gradually came to realize that indigenous polities often viewed treaties with the Company not as permanently binding contracts, but as affirmations of their prestige and temporary status within an international political hierarchy [20], serving merely as preliminary outcomes of maneuvering with foreign powers in search of security [21].

From the perspective of indigenous political traditions in Maluku, what the Dutch described as failure to abide by treaties was not an act of bad faith, but conformed to the fundamental nature of local covenant relations. Indigenous diplomatic practices such as ritual alliances and oath-sworn pacts had long existed in the

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Maluku Islands. Covenants were essentially temporary bonds forged on the basis of mutual interests and security needs, and their validity was predicated on reciprocal benefits for both parties. They did not carry the permanent binding force typical of European-style treaties; if one party disrupted the balance of interests, it was deemed legitimate for the other to adjust its stance. Some recent research has argued that Asian elites were not necessarily ignorant of the implications of the VOC treaties, or unable to make their own point in negotiations; rather, it was a give-and-take process in which both sides had realistic expectations of the outcome. Non-Western groups in the early modern world frequently had a grasp of the legal implications of the treaties and attempted to claim their rights [22] Dutch officials imposed their own pursuit of permanent monopoly on the indigenous covenant tradition, while unilaterally demanding absolute compliance from the local side. This cognitive dissonance was precisely the deep-seated cultural root of the escalating conflict between the two parties. Constrained by the one-sided narrative of Dutch archives, it is difficult to fully reconstruct the details of internal decision-making at the Ternate court. Nevertheless, it is certain that the sultan's flexible interpretation of treaties stemmed not from individual character, but from the inherent diplomatic logic of Maluku's maritime society.

After careful deliberation, figures such as Pieter de Carpentier (Governor-General of the VOC, 1623–1627) submitted an adaptive strategy to headquarters centered on deterrence, supported by divide-and-rule tactics, and buffered by treaty-making [16]. In light of the dire situation in the Maluku Islands and the objective analysis provided by officials in Asia, the Heeren XVII issued new directives requiring the use of force should Ternate engage in actions detrimental to the Company's interests [7]. Judging from the eventual outcomes, the assessment and feedback provided by De Carpentier and his contemporaries regarding the situation in Ternate proved remarkably realistic. By late 1626, the Sultan of Ternate was no longer able to withstand the VOC's prolonged isolation and economic blockade; with his subject territories infiltrated, he was forced to sign treaties twice, in 1626 and 1629, progressively relinquishing his authority over his dependencies and devolving into a heavily supervised semi-vassal polity [23]. In 1632, the Company observed that Ternate was no longer capable of surviving apart from Company protection [16]; subsequently, it further refined its strategic posture toward Ternate, seeking to keep Ternate constantly embroiled in warfare without peace, thereby preventing them from escaping Company control and ensuring that the peoples remain perpetually dependent on the Company [7].

The attitudes of the Dutch headquarters and Company officials in Asia toward Ternate were less a matter of fundamental divergence than a process of cognitive alignment within a unified strategic framework. The reflections and feedback provided by Asian officials regarding conditions in Ternate not only accorded with headquarters' overarching guidance and the Company's strategic imperatives, but also demonstrated a profound grasp of the geopolitical landscape of the Maluku Islands, yielding a more comprehensive understanding that was transmitted back to Amsterdam. Far from constituting a departure from headquarters' directives, this feedback represented a rational adaptation formulated by the Governor-General through frontline practice, one that both accurately anticipated the risk of an ally's alienation and supplied countermeasures that were at once realistic and actionable.

3.2 Internal Divergence and Adaptation: Strategic Revisions through the Lens of Anglo-Dutch Rivalry

Throughout the process of establishing its monopoly over Southeast Asian spices, vigilance against European rivals remained a constant thread for the Dutch East India Company. Among these rivals, the Company's relationship with the English East India Company (EIC) was particularly intricate: the two engaged in fierce commercial competition while simultaneously forming a subtle and fragile alliance to jointly counter the Iberian empires. Owing to the stark contrast between European domestic political order and the geopolitical realities of Asian maritime spheres, long-standing strategic divergences and cognitive misalignments persisted between the VOC's European headquarters and its Asian frontline over how to handle Anglo-Dutch relations. This internal division, shaped by mutual friction and feedback, ultimately drove the dynamic adaptation of VOC colonial strategy. Although tensions between the two parties had been evident since their initial entry into the East Indies, giving rise to repeated friction, no large-scale conflict broke out nor was force formally resorted to prior to 1617. This produced a dual reality wherein superficial peace and restraint in Europe coexisted with persistent friction in the East Indies. The fundamental root of this situation lay in the divergence between the Dutch headquarters in Europe and the Asian headquarters regarding how to manage Anglo-Dutch

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competition. Shaped by their differing positions, this disagreement proved impossible to eliminate entirely, remaining subject instead to continual negotiation and pragmatic reconciliation.

3.2.1 The European Headquarters' Illusion of Union

For the Dutch States General and the board of directors, the Heeren XVII, the Anglo-Dutch rivalry was situated within the overarching context of European geopolitics. Under the shadow of the Eighty Years' War, countering Spain and Portugal remained the ultimate objective of Dutch national strategy. Consequently, in handling frictions with the EIC, the absolute baseline for headquarters was to prevent differences from escalating into bilateral hostility or outright war. It sought to achieve two major strategic objectives through peaceful and diplomatic means: preserving the Company's trade monopoly in Southeast Asia while maintaining peace—or even pursuing a formal union—with the English, thereby curbing the EIC's unchecked expansion while jointly opposing Iberian power.

As early as 1610, headquarters was acutely aware of the threat posed by the English East India Company, identifying it alongside potential French East India companies as a major hazard threatening to undermine the spice monopoly, and emphasizing the need for constant vigilance against the establishment of similar companies in France, England, or elsewhere [24]. At this time, the Grand Pensionary of the Dutch Republic was the pro-French statesman Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. The States General's briefing on developments in France indicated that potential trade conflicts with the French in the East Indies remained manageable—a sentiment that echoed its alert stance regarding English competition, underscoring that headquarters already viewed the EIC as the primary obstacle to the Company's monopoly over Southeast Asian trade. As commercial disputes in Asia intensified, confrontations between England and the Dutch Republic at the state level also escalated. Between 1607 and 1610, William Keeling and David Middleton completed the EIC's Third Voyage; upon their return, the EIC lodged formal complaints against the Dutch company for obstructing its trading activities while petitioning the Lord Treasurer, Robert Cecil. The Dutch East India Company subsequently alerted the States General, marking the formal intervention of public state authority on both sides [25]. On February 1, 1612, the English delivered a declaration from King James I condemning the Dutch for disregarding the friendship between the two nations, seeking to monopolize the Indies trade, and mimicking the unjust conduct of the Spanish, while demanding that a formal treaty be negotiated regarding Indies affairs to preserve peace [24].

In negotiations, however, neither the English nor the Dutch were willing to relinquish their trade interests in the East Indies, and both sides launched mutual attacks against each other's claims to commercial rights. In the early seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius had already argued that the sea could not be possessed, fell under no state's sovereignty, and was beyond the control of any single nation; it ought to be free and open to all peoples, allowing anyone to navigate and trade freely across the ocean [26], thereby refuting the monopoly over overseas expansion granted to Castile and Portugal under the Treaty of Saragossa [27]. The English, for their part, similarly countered the Dutch by invoking freedom of the seas and the law of nations (*aller volckeren recht*) [7], maintaining that no nation had the right to bar others from participating in trade and pointing out that most of the exclusive contracts signed by the Dutch with Southeast Asian polities were exacted under pressure and coercion, in violation of the principles of justice in natural law [28].

In response, the Dutch East India Company promptly elevated its bilateral contracts with indigenous polities above the law of nations. These bilateral treaties served to legitimize the Company's exclusive rights, allowing it to exercise full jurisdiction over certain territories without a formal transfer of sovereignty [29], even though these bilateral agreements were mostly unequal bargains based on reciprocal interests and their conclusion did not necessarily align with the genuine will of local populations, the Dutch nevertheless regarded them as an unchallengeable supreme principle to refute the legal arguments of rival powers [4]. The Dutch emphasized that Southeast Asian rulers possessed the right to self-determination, and that their voluntary entry into exclusive agreements with the Dutch constituted a clear and legitimate restriction placed upon freedom of trade. Since the right of consent served as one of the meta-rules of European civilization, holding supreme authority, contracts concluded through mutual consent possessed paramount legal force [30]. As the subject of rights, the VOC had a responsibility to ensure treaty compliance, and instances where certain indigenous peoples failed to fully observe agreements did not render those agreements invalid [20]. This internal contradiction between freedom of the seas and exclusive monopoly failed to secure indisputable legal legitimacy for the VOC in international law; instead, it became the most intractable knot in Anglo-Dutch diplomatic negotiations, directly

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plunging the European talks into a stalemate. While maintaining a hypocritical and genteel peace in Europe, London and Amsterdam dispatched instructions to their respective Asian headquarters to contain one another, even as they dragged through arduous negotiations.

Although legal and jurisprudential differences caused negotiations to stall for a time, the European headquarters, driven by the core strategic necessity of guarding against the Iberians, never abandoned its idealized vision of an Anglo-Dutch union. In 1613, when the Heeren XVII appointed Gerard Reynst as Governor-General, convinced that the English would once again embroil Company affairs in Banda in difficulty, they instructed him to keep a close watch on English activities in the Spice Islands and prepare defensive measures [6]; yet in 1614, they still petitioned the States General to resolve disputes with James I as quickly as possible to ensure that the English should not usurp the fruits which the Company had created with immense expenditure and labor [24]. In 1615, the States General urged Noël de Caron to advance the merger of the two East India companies, the central consideration being "to more effectively resist Spain and Portugal. Otherwise, Spain will destroy both one by one. By then, the revenue Spain derives from the Indies will exceed that of all its other territories combined. They will then bear no military costs, enjoy a monopoly over the spice trade, and fix prices at will." [24] In the instructions formulated by the Heeren XVII for Asian officials in 1617, they again emphasized the need to guard against English sabotage when selecting a central rendezvous point [7].

The attitude of the Dutch States General and the Company headquarters toward the English East India Company remained deeply entangled in the contradictory tension between advancing negotiations and maintaining a defensive posture. Yet these two objectives were inherently mutually exclusive—a trade monopoly would inevitably squeeze English profits, while joint cooperation required ceding certain core interests. This irreconcilable internal conflict meant that although bilateral negotiations dragged on, they remained at the level of superficial deliberations without achieving meaningful breakthroughs. Not until 1619, as the expiration of the Twelve Years' Truce drew near, did the risk of conflict between the Dutch and the Iberian powers escalate dramatically. The urgency of external threats completely eclipsed the commercial friction between the English and the Dutch, ultimately pushing both sides to set aside their disputes and sign a defense treaty aimed at easing rivalry [31].

3.2.2 The Asian Frontline: Transitioning from Compromise to Force

In contrast to headquarters' macro-political perspective, the perceptions and attitudes of Dutch officials in Asia toward the English were grounded in the empirical realities of commercial rivalry in Southeast Asia. An early seventeenth-century English travel account recorded that the Dutch boasted of being stronger at sea than all other Christian nations, branded the English as thieves and robbers, and threatened to withdraw their protection from Ternate should its Sultan trade with the English [32]. Simultaneously, frequent piratical activities by the English East India Company in Asian maritime spheres not only severely damaged Asian perceptions of the English company, but also provoked widespread hostility among Asian polities toward Europeans in general [28]. This stemmed from the fact that Islamic legal traditions categorized piracy as a common enemy of all mankind, urging fellow Muslims to show zero tolerance toward such acts and even deeming the combat against piracy a more meritorious deed than fighting for the cause of God [33]. Consequently, the complaint lodged by the Dutch East India Company before the States General on July 27, 1606, concerning English piratical conduct in the East Indies, marked the very inception of what would become a long series of unresolved negotiations between the VOC and EIC over commercial conflicts in Southeast Asia [3].

Constrained by objective limitations in military manpower and resources, early Governors-General such as Gerard Reynst sought to strike a balance between obeying headquarters' directives for peace and safeguarding the Company's interests. The Company's long-standing shortage of military personnel stemmed in part from the arduous voyage from Europe—soldiers dispatched from ports in the Dutch Republic took an average of eight months to reach Batavia. Scholars estimate that approximately 7% of those setting sail from the Netherlands did not survive the first leg to the Cape of Good Hope, while an additional 3% to 4% perished during the return voyage from the Cape [34]. Although instructed to guard against English damage to the spice trade in the Spice Islands, rather than adopting an aggressive stance of confrontation, Reynst weighed the pros and cons and advised the Dutch headquarters to temporarily compromise:

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The English consistently view our intentions with hostility and scheme to monopolize control here. Should they succeed, it would inflict severe damage upon us in the years to come. To forestall such a crisis and other potential harassments by the English, I recommend that the Company temporarily adopt an attitude of forbearance toward local English merchants. Though this nation is notoriously arrogant, unbearable, and driven purely by self-interest, weighing all factors suggests that a temporary compromise remains prudent. Only by establishing our dominance in the Indies through this approach can the mutual interests of both parties possibly be realized [16].

In 1615, he reiterated when an English fleet arrive to trade in Maluku, Ambon, Banda, or elsewhere, the Company ought to dispatch warships to intimidate the indigenous population, preventing them from selling spices to the English in the gentlest manner possible to maintain friendly relations with them and avoid conflict [16]. This dual approach—combining compromise with intimidation—appeared to prevent damage from the EIC while maintaining outward peace; however, it proved to be merely an idealized notion. Far from repelling the impact of the EIC, this moderate strategy resulted in the indigenous population being incited by the English to harbor hostility and resentment toward the Dutch, believing themselves to be imprisoned and deprived of commercial freedom by them [16].

The actual conditions on the Asian frontline exposed the European headquarters' misjudgment regarding the Anglo-Dutch commercial conflict. The Heeren XVII had unilaterally assumed that the English were coercing indigenous populations into trade through military force, instructing Company officials to counter with force whenever such situations arose. In reality, however, local populations were flocking to trade with the English of their own accord in an eager attempt to break the Dutch monopoly. By issuing instructions that asserted the Company's right to retaliate against English acts of force on the one hand, while repeatedly emphasizing the need for peaceful coexistence for the sake of the greater political good on the other [16], headquarters placed frontline officials in an untenable dilemma.

As the conflict escalated, a new generation of frontline officials, represented by Jan Pieterszoon Coen, completely abandoned all illusions regarding the English. Even after the Dutch and English concluded a formal alliance in 1619, Coen and his contemporaries remained deeply suspicious of the English East India Company. In 1621, Coen firmly maintained that "a situation in which the English occupy independent strongholds in Java or its vicinity cannot be tolerated, for they will inevitably strive to obstruct the vital lifeline and growth of our Republic's flourishing trade... Under no circumstances can the English be relied upon: today their ships ride at anchor in the port of Banten, yet tomorrow they may shift their stance for private gain." [16] In 1625, the Asian headquarters enumerated multiple grounds to resolutely prevent the English from re-entering Banten: first, an unwillingness to bear the full costs of the blockade while allowing the English to reap the benefits without cost; second, the fear that once the English established a presence, the Dutch would permanently forfeit their dominance over Banten's trade and their capability to enforce blockades; third, an intense distrust of the English, believing the Company would be cheated in joint commercial operations; and fourth, the concern that the reopening of Banten as an international port would pose a direct threat to Batavia's development, as the English and Banten's rulers might join forces to strangle this fledgling Dutch colonial hub [16].

The attitude of VOC officials in Asia toward the English East India Company remained a conflicted synthesis of deterrence and tolerance: while desiring to resolve disputes through official channels, they simultaneously harbored persistent distrust toward the English. The tolerance demonstrated by Company officials was not a matter of weakness or capitulation, but a pragmatic calculation grounded in reality. On the one hand, constrained by objective limitations in military manpower and resources, Company outposts in Asia could ill afford a large-scale conflict with the English; on the other hand, out of legitimacy and strategic considerations, direct confrontation would inevitably disrupt the peace negotiations in Europe and shake the very foundations of the Company's commercial monopoly. Consequently, even as they witnessed English efforts to siphon off profits and vilify the Company's reputation, officials continued to advocate maintaining amicable relations and avoiding conflict. Meanwhile, the implementation of deterrence drew its legal justification from the exclusive treaties signed with Southeast Asian polities, obstructing English trade through naval intimidation and related measures, while implicitly reflecting a profound distrust of the English national character. In Jacques Specx's 1631 report, he described the character of the English as "quick to make promises, yet shameless in fulfilling them." [16] In the eyes of Dutch officials, it was precisely the English disregard for the spirit of mutual treaties, their continuous reliance on piratical acts and predatory competition to damage Dutch interests, and their persistence in acting with impunity even after conflicts became officialized, that

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caused the Anglo-Dutch peace negotiations in Europe to drag on so arduously. This strategy of deterrence was thus both an indispensable means to safeguard core interests and a direct response to English faithlessness.

On the whole, the Dutch States-General, the Heeren XVII, and the VOC Asian headquarters maintained a fundamentally coherent stance toward the English East India Company, yet notable divergences persisted. While headquarters in Europe sought to reconcile two overarching goals—maximizing commercial profits and maintaining an alliance with the English—officials in Asia recognized an irreconcilable conflict between the two. This divergence in perspective caused a profound disconnect between the macro-strategy formulated in the Dutch Republic and the practical feedback coming from the Asian front, ultimately producing starkly contrasting interactive dynamics in Europe and Asia at the exact same time. Consequently, in 1619, while Anglo-Dutch military conflicts reached their peak in Southeast Asia, the two powers concluded a formal treaty of alliance in Europe that very same year. Yet despite these tactical differences, the underlying point of departure and ultimate objective for both home authorities and overseas officials remained steadfastly the same: safeguarding the Dutch East India Company's commercial monopoly.

4. Conclusion

The diplomatic practice of VOC was always centred on commercial interests, giving rise to a feedback-response mechanism of headquarters directives – Asian feedback – strategic adjustment. The evolution of diplomatic instructions from 1609 to 1650 reflected the company's firm predominance in Southeast Asia and its deepened grasp of regional dynamics. Nevertheless, the perceptions and decision-making of the headquarters were not always fully aligned with those on the Asian frontline, and Asian officials were by no means passive executors of European directives. The discrepancies between the two stemmed not only from delays in information transmission and cognitive gaps caused by geographical distance, but also from the individual styles and positional inclinations of different officials. The stable information feedback mechanism enabled the headquarters to continuously revise its assessment of the Asian situation and adjust policy directives in a timely manner. Meanwhile, in the event of cognitive conflicts, Asian officials could exert reverse influence on the direction of decision-making at the practical level through cautious implementation and written submissions of proposals. This course of events reveals the essence of the VOC's early colonial engagement: it reshaped top-level macro directives through steady information transmission and feedback, and drove policy changes on the basis of pragmatism rather than idealised schemes.

Notably, although the 1650 instructions marked the maturity of the diplomatic top-level design, this written framework was consistently marked by a significant gap with Southeast Asian realities in its implementation, and never truly delivered the standardised governance anticipated by the headquarters. Among the semi-vassal polities of the Maluku Islands, the Sultan of Ternate continued to exert influence over vassal villages through traditional suzerainty, and clandestine trade between local chiefs and foreign merchants persisted despite repeated bans, forcing the company to resort to constant military deterrence to barely uphold the treaties. In regions of independent polities, regimes such as Siam and Johor consistently maneuvered among multiple regional powers and never fell fully under the Dutch hierarchical control system. Even in stateless societies in peripheral areas of southeastern Maluku, the Dutch covenant system repeatedly failed to take root, with diplomatic relations oscillating between alliance and conflict.

This disparity precisely demonstrates that the divergence between headquarters directives and Asian realities was not a temporary phenomenon of the early phase, but a structural contradiction running through the entire colonial history of the VOC. The refinement of the written system never truly resolved the information asymmetry caused by geographical distance, nor could it bridge the fundamental conflict between European jurisprudence and indigenous orders. The company's diplomatic practice always wavered between top-level design and local compromise, with pragmatic adaptation always taking precedence over dogmatic enforcement.

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