Summary

- ***Background***

  Great powers should be critically monitored as their mutual relations and individual ambitions have implications for Dutch society. Collaborations with people, companies, and governments from autocratic states (including smaller ones) should be critically monitored, as the balance between positive and negative effects for them and our societies is precarious. This study investigates how awareness of this is accounted for in the Dutch port and knowledge sectors. It is precisely the strength of our maritime transport and knowledge economy that can also form our national weakness due to threats from foreign powers. Therefore, it is important to determine the extent to which the port and knowledge sectors are aware of state threats.

- ***The study***

  The port sector: In February 2022, before the war in Ukraine intensified, internationally operating oil ports in Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Ghent were hit by cyberattacks. There was concern that, in response to economic sanctions against the Russian Federation, European vital infrastructure was at risk of being paralyzed by sabotage of energy supplies and transport flows. The Port of Rotterdam (PoR) and the North Sea Canal Area (NZKG) are also important maritime transport hubs in the Netherlands, and they are part of our country's vital infrastructure. If they fail or are disrupted, it can lead to serious social disruption. Is the port sector sufficiently aware of this threat, and is it resilient against it?

  The knowledge sector: In addition, national security is at stake if illegitimate knowledge is extracted from our (scientific) knowledge institutions, which form a vital infrastructure for the Netherlands as a knowledge economy. Although it is known that scientific knowledge can be a target of espionage by foreign powers and (state) companies, it is unclear to what extent people within this sector act on this insight.

  A pilot study was conducted on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security to explore awareness of state threats within the port and knowledge sectors. The research took place from April 2022 to April 2023. An empirical exploration was conducted based on a scientific literature study, interviews with 51 respondents working in the port and knowledge sectors, government, and chain partners.

Additionally, a (social) media analysis was conducted, and a digital questionnaire was distributed. The findings of the empirical exploration are presented in chapters 4 through 7, with chapter 4 focusing on what the media tells the public about state threats. The subsequent chapters focus on awareness in the port and knowledge sectors and the corresponding responsibilities.

- ***Retrospective awareness (Findings chapter 5)***

  The findings indicate that in the Dutch port and knowledge sectors, there has been a naive attitude towards state threats for too long. The current awareness of this threat in both sectors is characterized by recognizing state actors (including those operating through non-state actors), understanding the intentions of state actors, and analyzing vulnerabilities. The port sector is vulnerable to disruption, or elimination, while the knowledge sector is vulnerable to illegitimate knowledge extraction, or incorporation.

- ***New critical awareness (Findings chapter 6)***

  Furthermore, the findings indicate that in both sectors a new critical awareness has emerged regarding excessive concern, which can lead to stigmatization and paranoia. In the port sector, excessive concern can lead to the loss of international businesses. In the knowledge sector, it can lead to the impoverishment of the intellectual climate due to the loss of international collaboration and funding, as well as international students. There is also a new awareness of the dual role of social media: social media raises awareness of threats, but also facilitates undesirable influence by state actors. The flip side of threat awareness is also the fear that resilience against state threats itself may pose a risk to the fundamental principles of the port and knowledge sectors: resilience can hinder the logistics process (more broadly, freedom of movement of transport and trade) in ports, or compromise academic freedom in educational institutions.

- ***Responsibility for awareness (Findings chapter 7)***

  Regarding responsibility for creating a balanced awareness of state threats in society, the findings show that respondents from both sectors 'withdraw' to their own organization (department) and job description. Respondents state that they do not see a direct responsibility for themselves within the port and knowledge sectors to stimulate awareness of state threats. In that sense, personal responsibility seems to be avoided. At the same time, respondents and actors within the port and knowledge sectors point to other parties, in particular 'the government' (and, to a lesser extent, intelligence services within that government), to take strong(er) action as a government, particularly by sharing more information. Thus, responsibility is assigned to others.

- ***Research recommendations***

  Given the findings of this report, it is recommended to: 1) conduct (quantitative) follow-up research in other vital sectors, such as healthcare, aviation or the railway sector, 2) conduct international (comparative) research into the (policy) approach to state threats, 3) conduct studies into the layered nature of awareness, or who at which level in an organization needs to be aware of what, and 4) conduct research into specific cyber awareness of state threats.