SECTION: AMERICAN MIDTERM ELECTIONS
with Damon S. Porter, Matt A. Mayer en Stanley R. Sloan

THE DUTCH MISSION IN URUZGAN
Beatrice de Graaf

TIGHTENING NATO’S BELT
Debate  Fulfilling the promise of change, mastering the mandate
What to consider after the 2010 midterm elections  Damon S. Porter

Debate  Of waxed wings
Obama’s reality check after the midterm elections  Matt A. Mayer

Debate  Transatlantic relations after the U.S. midterm elections
Stanley R. Sloan

Analysis  The Dutch mission in Uruzgan
Political and military lessons  Beatrice de Graaf

Analysis  Tightening NATO’s belt
Austerity measures in defence spending  Arno Hamar de la Brethonière and Raimond van Engelen

Atlantic News Survey

Books

Meeting
In the past, military defeat has led to resignations of Ministers of Defence. But in February this year, it was the first time a ruling party, the Social Democrats (PvdA), brought down the coalition government, as protest against extending a military mission. This historical moment even inspired the Taliban to congratulate the Social Democrats: ‘we congratulate the Dutch for this courageous and independent decision,’ said Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi. The Taliban hope other countries will follow the Dutch example. After four years of intensive commitment to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the mission of around 2,000 Dutch soldiers in the Afghan province Uruzgan ended. On August 1, the last troops of Taskforce Uruzgan (TFU) transferred command to American forces.

Between 2006 and 2010 The Netherlands were active as lead nation in Uruzgan. Thousands of soldiers and dozens of civilian personnel contributed significantly to ISAF. Initially, rotations of 1,200 to 1,400 soldiers would serve in Uruzgan, a figure that rose to almost 2,000. The Dutch suffered 24 fatal casualties.

What exactly did the Dutch troops do in Uruzgan? How was the mission presented, which discussions were held over definitions and terminology? An what happened during these four years? Only rarely did military deployment lead to such intense discussion as did TFU, in the media as well as in politics. The Netherlands invested heavily in this operation. Many more soldiers were deployed than in previous years, and Dutch soldiers did not engage in combat so often since the Korean War.

This article analyses the recent history of the Dutch mission in Uruzgan, both the political-strategic and the operational and tactical aspects. First, the focus lies on the political discussion and the nature of the mission. Second, some actual TFU operations will be examined.

The mission: decision to deploy

Deploying the armed forces is not the prerogative of the administration alone. Support of Parliament is required. The process of ‘framing’ a foreign crisis as a national security issue or as an obligation as a respectable ally is therefore the first political step to persuade Parliament. Military expert Frank Kitson observed this as early as 1977:

“The first thing that must be apparent when contemplating the sort of action which a government facing insurgency should take, is that there can be no such thing as a purely military solution because insurgency is not primarily a military activity.”

This quote relates to executing counterinsurgency (COIN) missions on the operational and tactical level, but it also applies to the national level of decision-making and communication process. Also the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide, published in 2010, recognised this issue: “a COIN strategy is only as good as the political plan at its heart.” Government officials need a clear political plan and accompanying communication strategy, both for themselves and for Parliament.

How did that go in the Netherlands? From the beginning, TFU was part of the ISAF operation aimed at combating international terrorism and stabilising the Afghan region. That was also how the Dutch participation was presented. On 22 December 2005, in an article-100 declaration, the Dutch government Ministers Henk Kamp (Defence), Ben Bot (Foreign Affairs) and Agnes van Ardenne
(Development Cooperation) informed the Second Chamber (Dutch House of Representatives) of the mission in Uruzgan. The aim of the mission, described in the declaration, was in accordance with the ISAF mandate. The Netherlands were thus not officially at war; Article 96 of the Constitution did not come into effect. It was in the first place a question of promoting good governance, setting up efficient police and armed forces and assisting in the building of a constitutional state, as well as carrying out CIMIC and reconstruction activities.

The linkage between bringing stability, security and reconstruction was recognised early by the three Ministers. In a letter sent to the Second Chamber on 22 December 2005, they wrote:

‘The stabilisation and reconstruction of Afghanistan, especially in the south, where the Taliban has its origin, is of the greatest importance for the promotion of international order and the fight against international terrorism which also threatens Europe. In view of that importance the government considers the risks [of the mission] acceptable.’

The Ministers also stated that without a certain level of security, economic reconstruction could not start. This observation was in line with the prevailing views on crisis management that security and stability are the pre-conditions for lasting development.

In February 2006 the Second Chamber decided that Dutch soldiers should be sent under the flag of the TFU to Uruzgan province in the south of Afghanistan. The plan was that the Dutch troops would take over two bases in Uruzgan. From there they would gradually extend their influence and in so doing promote security and stability in the province. This would consequently facilitate the reconstruction to be carried out preferably in collaboration with Afghan and international organisations.

The mission: the debate

Immediately after the February decision a discussion about the nature of the mission took off, which was adopted and dramatised in the media. In the course of a general consultation in the Second Chamber on 22 February 2006, member Farah Karimi (Groenlinks; Green Party), for example, defined the Dutch deployment as a ‘combat mission,’ even before the first TFU rotation became operational. The term ‘combat mission’ was then taken up by other opposition parties (the SP and later also by D66 and the PVV), heralding the beginning of a long discussion over the mission – a discussion which centred on the (supposed) opposition between the terms ‘reconstruction mission’ and ‘combat mission.’

Critics in Parliament were mostly afraid the Dutch reconstruction activities would overlap with the American combat operations...
carried out under Operation Enduring Freedom. Dutch soldiers were supposed to build schools, promote women’s emancipation and invest in local government – and rather not fight too much. Conservative parties denounced this ‘soft’ approach as doubting the usefulness of one-sided humanitarian activities in a country so deeply divided and scourged by armed conflicts.

Ministers Bot and Van Middelkoop tried to turn the tide by pointing out that the government had never alleged it was a matter of such a simplistic opposition. But the harm was already done. Not only in public debate but also in the media the TFU was increasingly discussed in terms of this opposition.

The armed forces themselves tried to avoid this narrowing of vision by making it clear that many options were open at the same time. On the question of whether it should be a combat mission or a reconstruction mission the commander of TFU-1, Colonel Theo Vleugels, replied: ‘We are going to do what is necessary and possible.’ Major-General Ton van Loon, commander of Regional Command-South (RC-South) from 1 November 2006 to 1 May 2007, also avoided getting dragged into the discussion then being conducted in the Netherlands: ‘We must also be prepared, in certain places where we cannot construct, to fight in order to achieve that security.’

The commander of TFU-2, Colonel Hans van Griensven, commented: ‘The words “reconstruction mission” and “combat mission”, and their interpretation do not exist in our Defence Doctrine.’ In the years immediately following, Defence tried to break out of this polarised discussion. On 5 October 2007 General Dick Berlijn, then Commander of the Armed Forces, let it be known that he was not at all happy with the term ‘reconstruction mission.’ Minister Van Middelkoop stressed that the mission in south Afghanistan should be characterised neither as a ‘reconstruction mission’ nor as a ‘combat mission.’

These nuances had little effect, however. The contradiction between combat and reconstruction remained forcefully in the public conceptualisation and debates. Why was there so little room and understanding for the nuances?

The mission as a COIN campaign

It is remarkable that Dutch government Ministers, both before and outside Parliament, avoided the use of the concept of COIN as much as they could. COIN is present in all ISAF documents, for example in the Tactical Directive of COM ISAF. But compared to debates in Great Britain, France or the U.S., COIN seems to have a negative connotation in the Netherlands. After all, COIN also stood for offensive, kinetic operations. Instead of COIN, the government introduced the ‘3D concept’: the trinity of Development, Diplomacy and Defence, which sounded much better than the militaristic term ‘counterinsurgency’ according to Dutch politicians.

However, the Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken (AIV; Advisory Council on International Affairs) concluded that the 3D-approach only served to increase the confusion, since it was not backed by any doctrine and could be interpreted at liberty.

Yet a uniform political description of the mission as a COIN operation would have been the best choice. Other descriptions raised the wrong expectations. COIN indicates that besides civil and administrative activities, combat is necessary as well. Reconstruction, however, suggests a population welcomes foreign units. The gap between expectations in the Netherlands and actual practice in Afghanistan thus widened. In 2006, 36 per cent of the population supported the mission, 26 per cent did not. In 2009, the figure opposing the mission rose to forty per cent, while the support dropped to 33 per cent. In 2009 only ten per cent of the population believed the mission in Afghanistan would help reduce the risk of terrorist attacks in the Netherlands – whereas this had exactly been the claim of the government officials who wrote the decision to deploy.

Historian Christ Klep has convincingly argued that whenever a peace mission fails to turn out as outlined in advance, such a gap between image and reality (which is ultimately the result of unclear conceptual thinking and decision-making) can lead to enormous tensions and dramatic consequences. In other words: by clearly defining the mission as a COIN operation, political and public support and knowledge can be mobilised to gain the necessary combination of administrative, military and humanitarian aspects of the mission. Furthermore, commanders in the field won’t have to face constant scrutiny from a Second Chamber, which incorrectly believes military operations are not connected to humanitarian activities.

The confusion about the exact nature of the Dutch mission even existed within the military trade union: Wim van den Burg, the chairman of the military trade union in the Netherlands, publicly objected against prolongation of the mission with the argument that Dutch soldiers could not be asked to give their lives for a corrupt government – signalling that he measured success of the mission against the level of democratisation in Afghanistan. However, democratisation was never explicitly formulated as a goal of the mission.

The AIV concluded in April 2009 that better communication was essential. Maintaining broad and vague concepts would not only keep the confusion and polarised discussion in place, but would also keep raising the wrong expectations at a time when democratic legitimacy and public-political support for a military mission were crucial.

It was not only the Dutch government that failed to convince its population of the necessity of the mission in Uruzgan. Lord Robertson, NATO Secretary General from 1999 to 2004, signalled during a speech in March 2010 that the Alliance was ‘on the edge of a precipice’:
"If these two robust allies [The Netherlands and Canada] and those who may be thinking of doing the same, and additionally those who contribute less than they should, can all shy away from their obligation stemming from the decision taken unanimously in 1993, what is it other than a crisis?"  

This does not mean that ending TFU and the declining support in Europe for the war in Afghanistan could only be blamed on an inadequate communication strategy. There are sufficient concrete political and military arguments to justify withdrawal. Participation in ISAF was and still is a political choice, rather than inescapable necessity. Still, the right display of the goal and nature of the mission and a clear and uniform presentation thereof to the people would have narrowed the gap between public expectations and military reality. This would have sobered down the political and sometimes heated debate about prolongation of the mission.

What then could the government have made clear? First of all that TFU would be in a COIN campaign from the very start in 2006. The U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide defines COIN as the “blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain insurgency and address its root causes.” The common definition of the Dutch armed forces is similar to the one of Joint Publication 1-02.

Counterinsurgency is thus directed not primarily at the elimination of insurgents themselves (an enemy-centric approach), but at the security of the population (a population-centric approach). As Major-General Mart de Kruif, the Dutch commander of RC-South from November 2008 until November 2009, put it: ‘Yes, we shall kill evildoers, but the centre of gravity [of our mission] lies in protecting the population.’ The final outcome of a successful counterinsurgency campaign is a legitimate, sovereign government in the eyes of the population, that can ensure effective administration and can independently reduce the insurgency to – or maintain it at – an acceptable level. In operations like the mission in Afghanistan, there was a clear hierarchy of aims: the political goal stood first and foremost, while the approach, the way in which the diplomatic, military, and development means are deployed, is secondary to this primary goal – thus this completely matched the definition of a COIN operation.

Moreover, the government could have expressed there was no such thing as a typical Dutch approach in the south of Afghanistan. Dutch strategy was not ‘softer’ or more focused on dialogue than the strategy of other states. It was a classic COIN approach, derived from the so-called ‘inkspot approach,’ separated in phases of ‘shape-clear-hold-build,’ in accordance with Field Manual 3-24. The ‘inkspot’ strategy was already discussed by Sir Robert Thompson in his standard work Defeating Communist Insurgency in 1966. This becomes clear when actual practice of the mission is examined, especially the large operations in the Baluchi Valley in the heart of Uruzgan, some twenty kilometres north of Tarin Kowt.

Baluchi Valley

The Baluchi valley was already a stronghold of the Taliban before the arrival of the Dutch and Australian military. In July 2006 the Dutch commandos took part in Operation Perth, an ISAF operation led by the Australian Special Operations Task Group. The main aim of Operation Perth was to reduce the threat for Tarin Kowt and its surrounding area by driving Taliban fighters out of the Baluchi valley. This was to prevent any threat arising to the construction of the Dutch camp in Tarin Kowt. The operation was successful, with 200 to 300 enemy combatants being killed and the rest of the enemy fleeing the area. As a result of the operation the Baluchi pass was for the first time accessible for ISAF troops and freedom of movement was created in the valley around Chora, Surkh Murgab, and Khurma.

However, after a brief period following this operation the valley was once again full of insurgents. As Major Joris correctly observed: ‘the enemy is fluid.’ Without a follow-up (hold), a sweep (clearing) operation has only a short-term effect. Driving out insurgents without the sufficient capacity – either on our part or that of the Afghan forces – to hold the area only leads to the territory falling into the hands of the enemy once more. It is then no more than a superficial area sweep. Colonel Theo Vleugels, the commander of TFU-1 said: ‘It’s like water: if you don’t stay it streams back.’ This was an important lesson.

During Operation Perth the units did not get round to the second stage (the hold-phase), in which the emphasis falls on various non-kinetic efforts to win over the population. That was not their objective, as explained earlier. However, as a direct consequence of the operation ceasing after the ‘clear’ stage, the ISAF troops, and therefore also the TFU, had to take control of the region all over again a year after the initiation of Operation Perth. Only after two more operations, Spin Ghar and Tura Ghar, did they learn the lesson of securing and holding the area on a 24/7, permanent presence base, not only building strongholds at the entrances of the valley, but also establishing posts within the valley itself. For an analysis of the two other operations in the Baluchi-Valley, see George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf, ‘The Dutch COIN approach: three years in Uruzgan, 2006-2009.’
Conclusion

The operations in the Baluchi valley demonstrated the TFU was indeed conducting a classical COIN-mission. TFU did draw that conclusion itself, learned from each previous operation and recognised that liberating an area without following up by establishing a permanent presence delivered only short-term results. At this point, in fact, a permanent presence in an area became the basis of the planning and execution of operations. Operations should be directly followed by reconstruction activities as well as training of native armed forces and/or security personnel.

At least as important, is the lesson that permanent presence is only possible when the political leadership and Parliament are familiar with what exactly a COIN operation is. Providing a few hundred troops for a quick sweep of an area and then expecting reconstruction to begin, appears a too simple version of reality. As things stood, permanent protection of the local population by Dutch forces was necessary, but with the current military capacities in mind, often an almost overstretching assignment. That does not mean success is impossible, but only in reach when a strong military presence is sustained over a longer period in a specific area. When political support is minimal from the start, when missions are presented as just ‘reconstruction’ or ‘training’, the military nature of operations in a situation of permanent guerrilla will be ignored – and these operations will thus not achieve the overall goal of the mission: securing an area, protecting the population and ‘holding’ it over a longer period of time.

The most important lesson that can be drawn from ‘Uruzgan’ is therefore that the nature of COIN operations – especially the value of the ‘hold’-stage – should not only be trained in all levels of the armed forces, but should also be explained better to politicians and the public. Why should Dutch soldiers deploy in far and inhospitable lands, what exactly is the national security issue? And if decided to deploy: what does deployment mean in a situation where warlords and guerrillas operate among civilians? What does 24/7 presence actually mean? How many troops are needed, for how much time? How much combat is acceptable? How long will it take before actual reconstruction can take off?

These questions have been answered too fast, simplistic and optimistic in the short history of Dutch deployment in Uruzgan. Nice, but rather vague metaphors and all-inclusive ‘3D approaches’ led to partisan political games, but did no justice to the military necessity of a specific execution and sufficient supervision of the chosen COIN strategy. They also did not create the support and understanding necessary to meet the requirements (like sufficient numbers of troops with a mandate for combat) needed for complex COIN operations. In short: when the Netherlands would like to keep expeditionary capabilities, it will not only require training of soldiers on the ground, but also statesmanship and clarity at the political leadership about the nature of the mission and the interests at stake.

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9. Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken (AIv), ‘Crisisbeheersingsoperaties in fragiele staten, de noodzaak van een samenhangende aanpak’ (March 2009), 17.