

Dutch Military Power: From Srebrenica to Uruzgan



Dutch Patria armoured vehicle of ISAF in Afghanistan

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In the past decade, the use of military force by the Netherlands has changed radically. The reasons for this change are a result of international developments, Dutch internal politics and operational lessons learned from past interventions.

The failure of Srebrenica in July 1995, a dark page in Dutch military history, is still alive. For months the Dutch battalion (Dutchbat) had been deprived from rations and ammunition and was stuck in an isolated location with decreasing manpower. In preparation for the mission the commander-in-chief of the army demanded that in order to emphasise the peaceful nature of the operation, the heavy guns on the armoured vehicles were to be replaced by machine-guns.

When the Bosnian-Serb forces invaded the so-called 'safe area' the force comparison was clearly against the Dutchbat. The minimal close air support provided by NATO, at the request of the United Nations, reached the area only after the battle had been fought. The results are well known. This tragic experience has had consequences for international politics, for Dutch security policy, as well as for the conduct of operations by the Dutch armed forces.

UN replaced by NATO

From the point of view of international security, the failed UN operation in Somalia a couple of years before, and even more the military action of the UN contingent of UNPROFOR in Srebrenica and other parts of Bosnia, demonstrated the failure of the United Nations in solving armed conflicts. As a result, the willingness of countries to allocate troops to the United Nations quickly diminished and, subsequently, NATO took over the role of global enforcement.



Dutch SFIR soldiers on patrol near As Samawah, Iraq

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At the same time, the feeling grew that troops of an international peace force should be allowed to use force if necessary. Concurrently, a change in Western military thinking became apparent. In spite of the absence of a corresponding UN resolution in 1999, NATO deemed it necessary to use military force against Serbia in the form of a 'humanitarian intervention' because of its actions against the Albanian people in Kosovo. The Dutch military participated actively in this operation, for instance a Royal Netherlands Air Force F-16 fighter shot down a Serbian Mig-29.

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'The armed forces have become an important instrument of Dutch foreign and security policy'

Military force and reconstruction

The impact of Srebrenica on politico-military thinking in The Hague has also been considerable. Dutch politicians concluded that a framework should be drafted by which each request for Dutch participation in an international military operation would be tested by parliament. Furthermore, in the past decade, the political mindset on participation in military missions has changed from primarily low-intensity peacekeeping operations to operations also in the highest spectrum of violence.

Examples of this change of thought towards giving more weight on the use of force have been the contribution of Dutch green berets and marines in the combat mission in Afghanistan and the intention of the previous Minister of Defence to acquire Tomahawk cruise missiles. In addition to this, experience in complicated military missions - such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan - have made it clear to the Dutch government and parliament that short-term military action in an armed conflict does not offer a structural solution for the country or the region involved.

In order to achieve structural aims, long-term socio-economic and state-building projects are necessary. Dutch defence is not capable of doing this alone and therefore the government initiated a structural cooperation between the Defence Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Development Cooperation. As a result of this approach of using military missions for structural conflict resolution, the Dutch soldier nowadays not only acts as a rifleman, but also as a diplomat and as a development worker.

Armed forces and security policy

This use of Defence as an instrument of foreign and security policy has been laid down by the government. Policy documents explain that national interests - or political ambitions of the government - are translated into aiming for a well-structured international society in which human rights are respected and the international legal order is upheld and promoted. Dutch defence policy has an objective that is derived from this: to form, maintain and deploy a military force in the context of the government's security policy.

Internal and external security has become increasingly interwoven in the security situation in recent years. In practice, this means that the Netherlands wants to help to resolve security problems within and outside Europe, even those that are a considerable distance away. Experiences in Afghanistan have shown that security and other interests can be threatened by developments that take place far from home. An active security policy therefore also involves the willingness to respond swiftly to crisis situations elsewhere in the world, obviously in an international context.

This attention to international security and the use of the military to support this policy is also expressed in the Dutch constitution, stating that the armed forces exist for the defence and protection of the interests of the kingdom, and in order to maintain and promote the international



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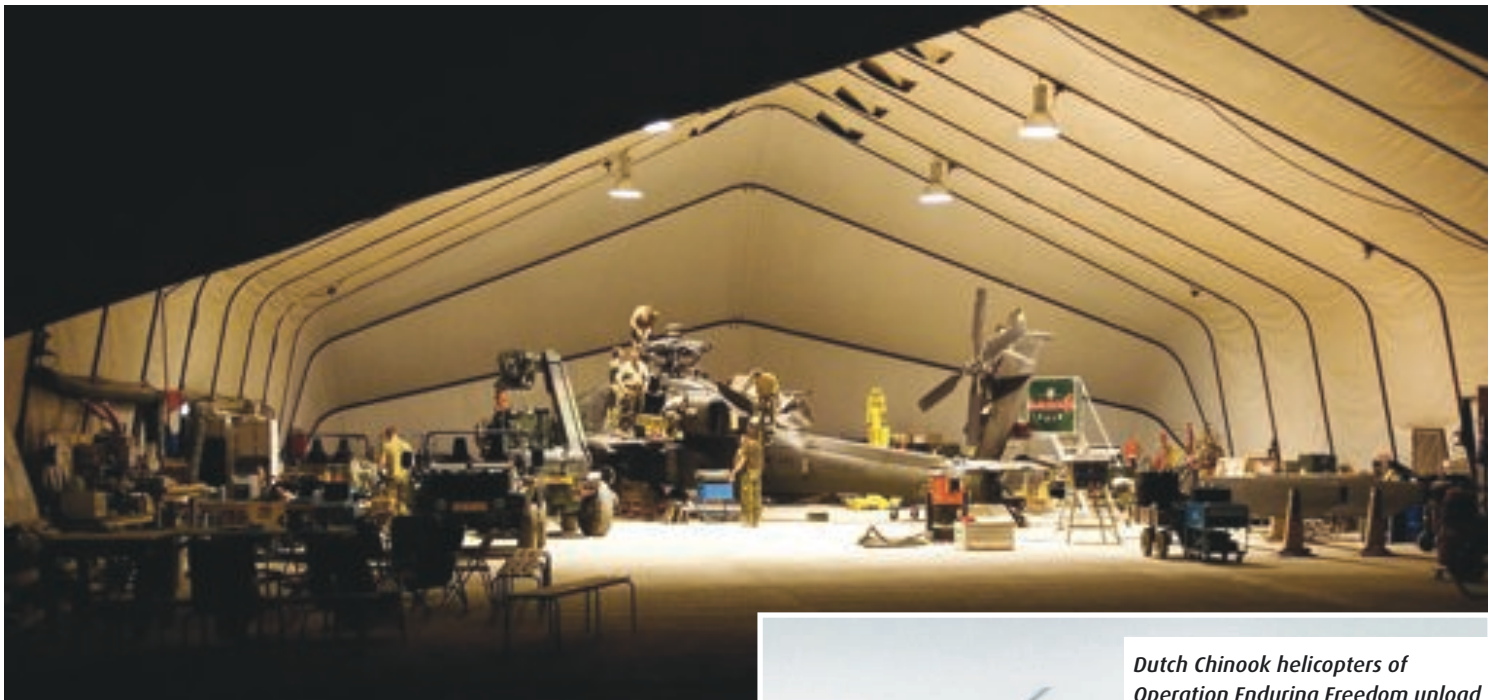
'The tragic experience of Srebrenica has had enormous consequences for the conduct of operations of the Dutch armed forces'

legal order. The political ambitions are translated into the tasking of the defence organisation, as mentioned in the first Netherlands Defence Doctrine of 2005: protecting the integrity of national and allied territory, including the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba; and promoting stability and the international rule of law; supporting civil authorities in upholding the law, providing disaster and humanitarian relief, both nationally and internationally.

Applying past military lessons

In recent years, the armed forces have become an important instrument of Dutch foreign and security policy. The political ambition of having expeditionary armed forces ready for worldwide military action at short notice has had enormous consequences for the military: a transformation from a large, conscript army to a lean professional state-of-the-art force. This transformation was not limited to concepts and structure but also influenced the mindset of the soldier who, instead of calmly waiting for an opponent from the East who never approached, now had to plan on being sent out on dangerous missions abroad every couple of years.

Srebrenica also resulted in a watershed in Dutch military thinking. The deployment of Dutch military forces abroad would never be in isolation again but always as an element of and in cooperation with troops of one or more other states. Moreover, if desirable, conducting the mission would be more robust: the time of playing shooting-duck for local factions was over. This approach meant that henceforth Dutch armed forces would enter an area heavily armed, using force as necessary, and only later, when



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circumstances were suitable, were they to change into a peacekeeping force.

In this regard, the Defence Doctrine also states that an important lesson learned from taking part in crisis management operations after the Cold War is that even in crisis management operations, under certain, usually rapidly changing circumstances, tactical units need to be able to shift to combat operations, even in the highest part of the spectrum of force. It is in this way, the Dutch armed forces are currently carrying out operations in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, remembering the lack of air support in Bosnia, another military lesson learned was that the Dutch armed forces would never again be dependent on others for combat support. Instead, combat support would be available within their own military contingent. For this reason, on the SFIR mission in Iraq, Dutch ground forces were supported by Apache combat helicopters and, currently, in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, the Dutch Battle Group and Provincial Reconstruction Team in Uruzgan province can count not only on their own Apaches, but also on F-16s and on the most sophisticated heavy howitzers. Thus, the Dutch contribution to ISAF is its most heavily armed expeditionary mission ever.

Dutch approach in Afghanistan

Now and then, sceptical remarks are heard about the so-called 'Dutch approach': the Dutch conduct of operations such as those previously carried out in Iraq and currently in Afghanistan. Allegedly, this approach of avoiding conflict with the opposing forces and withdrawing forces after being attacked is considered soft.

First of all, experiences in irregular warfare, such as Vietnam, Chechnya and Iraq, demonstrate that simply using force is not going to lead to a structural peaceful development of the country or region in question. The Dutch approach aims at guaranteeing security in specific spots in its area of operations and simultaneously providing the local population with reconstruction projects, such as the building of schools, water supplies and bridges. In this way, using the 'hearts and minds' method, the Afghans will realise that these soldiers are there to help and not to kill them. Gradually, the already secured and stabilised spots will be further enlarged, which is known as the 'ink spot' method.

In earlier years, by contributing to the Enduring Freedom mission in Afghanistan, Dutch politicians and the military have proven that they are willing and capable of supporting combat operations. In addition to this, the



Dutch Chinook helicopters of Operation Enduring Freedom unload Special Forces in Afghanistan

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'Humiliating treatment of a military contingent - acting for the benefit of international security such as in Srebrenica - is no longer acceptable'

Dutch ISAF forces, even before their main base was operational, destroyed Taliban forces before they attacked them. On other occasions in the Dutch area, and also in support of combat missions in areas of other participating countries, Dutch forces used their weapons as well, which resulted in the first casualties.

From past to present

Srebrenica will never be forgotten in the Netherlands. This event has had huge consequences for the international community and for Dutch Defence. Humiliating treatment of a military contingent - acting for the benefit of international security such as in Srebrenica - is no longer acceptable

Nowadays Dutch forces are conducting operations worldwide, from Congo via Bosnia to Afghanistan. Within NATO the Netherlands - although small in size - is one of the most active players when it comes to contributing to military missions. The armed forces actively demonstrate that they are an effective instrument of Dutch foreign and security policy.