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Afghanistan, the Dutch view

By Hans de Vreij

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The role of the Netherlands in the upcoming Afghanistan Conference in The Hague is, to a certain extent, limited in nature. It is the host nation, facilitator and co-chair of this United Nations meeting, but doesn't set the agenda.

Still, it is interesting to take a closer look at the Dutch position towards the situation in Afghanistan, if only to explain why the United States (which originally proposed to hold this meeting) asked The Netherlands to host the conference.

First of all, the Dutch are a main troop contributor to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The Netherlands is ISAF's lead nation in the province of Uruzgan, with Australia (itself not a NATO member) contributing a sizeable force under Dutch command. Other nations, such as France, Slovakia and Singapore contribute smaller units to ISAF's 'Task Force Uruzgan'.

In addition, when NATO expanded its area of operations to Southern Afghanistan in 2006, the Netherlands was asked (and accepted) to take on the rotating command over ISAF's activities in the six provinces concerned together with Canada and the United Kingdom. That decision put the Dutch in NATO's 'Big League' and, literally, in the frontline. Currently, Dutch Major-general Mart de Kruif commands 'Regional Command (South)', as the region is known in NATO parlance.



ISAF patrol in Afghanistan

Dutch cabinet view

In its most recent update to Parliament, the Dutch government says that 2009 will be "very important" for Afghanistan. "A credible and good proceeding of the Presidential elections on August 20th is essential for the legitimacy of the Afghan government", the Dutch government stated in a letter to Parliament of March 13th. "Even more than in recent years, the Afghan government will have to demonstrate that it is able to deliver peace and tangible improvements in (daily) life of the population".



The letter notes the new approach with regards to Afghanistan announced by the Obama administration, which it says will bring "renewed dynamics between the international community and the Afghan government"; more attention to the role of neighbouring countries; an increased military contribution to ISAF, and "a better balance" between defense, diplomacy and development.

Security deteriorating

The Dutch government in its letter notes a "disappointing" deterioration of the security situation in Southern Afghanistan - with the notable exception of Uruzgan province, although the government hastens to add that the current relative quietness in Uruzgan is not a guarantee for the near future. Likewise, the government says that the situation in and around the capital Kabul is "worrisome". "Security and stability, the goals of ISAF, have not come closer", the letter states.

On the Afghanistan Conference in The Hague, the Dutch government says it offers an opportunity to discuss

the current situation in Afghanistan in terms of politics, security and development in an integrated manner, and with an eye on the "regional context", in other words on the role that countries like India, Pakistan and Iran play. "It is important to show to the population of Afghanistan the long-term and solid involvement and support of the international community".

(Source: Cabinet letter to the Lower House on progress of the Afghanistan mission, 13 March 2009)

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Rahamtullah, 21-03-2009 - Afghanistan

As an Afghan and worker with Dutch army, They do not respect as human being. I put my life in danger with them as interpreter and you know, what they were doing. During Mission they oftently searched my bag and that is the biggest disreaspect in Afghan culture and as i got to my compund, I told to my boss that I would work for any one but not for Dutch. Please do not take me wrong, I want to tell you the truth. I will show you more than 30 tribal elders, who were complaining that the Dutch do not have any hospitality due to that these tribal elders were asked to come Kabul for find a new [way] to end the insurgency but all the tribal elders were upset from them instead of happy. I think, the Dutch do not know about our culture and I hope that they would read our culture then act on some thing.

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