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Why the Netherlands is Right to be Wary over Afghanistan

BERT BAKKER and LOUSEWIES VAN DER LAAN (op-ed)

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Tomorrow, the Dutch parliament will debate whether the Netherlands should expand its military presence in Afghanistan. The country currently participates in the Nato reconstruction mission in the north of the country with 368 troops and more than 250 Dutch special forces fight in Operation Enduring Freedom in Kandahar in the south. This makes the Netherlands the seventh largest contributor to Nato's International Security Assistance Force, ahead of 19 other Nato members.

Jan Peter Balkenende's government now proposes a third military mission to the central province of Uruzgan. It would replace the US troops that have been fighting the Taliban there for three years without bringing the stability needed to enable reconstruction to start. Last year, 1,500 people were killed in fighting in Afghanistan, the worst year since 2001. Strangely, rather than proposing an Enduring Freedom-type mission in Uruzgan, the Dutch government proposes a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) as part of the southern roll-out of ISAF.

A number of questions will therefore be central to the Dutch parliamentary debate: can 1,200 Dutch soldiers make a real contribution to reconstruction when the province still suffers from extreme instability and violence? Is this, in fact, not simply a terrorism-fighting mission disguised as a reconstruction effort and thus limited in its capability to act? How much time would the Dutch spend defending themselves against Taliban, drug barons and other militants? And how much time would be left to achieve the stated Nato goal of winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people? How could we avoid this "reconstruction mission" becoming embroiled in Enduring Freedom's combat mission and how could locals spot the difference?

Regrettably, rather than discussing these concerns, the Dutch reluctance about the Uruzgan mission has led to a political war of words that crowds out the issues of substance. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Nato secretary-general, has accused those opposing the mission of being afraid of the dangers of Uruzgan. This is not why many parliamentarians oppose it. The problem with the new mission is that it is flawed in its conception: a PRT cannot succeed in a warzone. The PRT will probably not leave the city, perhaps not even the compound. By not addressing this fundamental criticism, Nato is not taking parliament's concerns seriously.

In addition, threats have been issued which suggest that the Dutch can be bullied into going. First, according to Nato sources, if the Dutch do not go to Uruzgan, the whole ISAF mission will fail. Francesc Vendrell, the European Union's special envoy to Afghanistan, claims nothing less than the EU's credibility in Afghanistan is at stake. If the urgency of this mission is so evident, it should be easy to find other countries willing to contribute troops. The fact that no one else is volunteering is added reason for the Dutch parliament to think twice before agreeing to it.

Second, it is claimed that the Netherlands would lose its international credibility if it refused to go and would no longer be a trustworthy Nato ally. The Dutch military is active in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, the Middle East, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Sudan, Aceh and Pakistan. The Dutch are shouldering a disproportionate amount of the international military burden and we are proud of this. How could questioning one mission sweep away all our achievements?

Third, it is claimed that the Dutch would lose influence if this mission does not go ahead. Is the reverse true? Did the Netherlands, or even President George W. Bush's most loyal ally, Tony Blair, UK prime minister, benefit from supporting the US campaign in Iraq? Did we get

concessions on Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary rendition and Central Intelligence Agency camps? It is precisely because the US has so blatantly ignored pleas from its allies on human rights that the argument of losing influence now sounds hollow.

The tone of the debate is one of "you are either with us or against us". If Nato is to flourish, we must accept that parliaments ask questions when there is a call for soldiers to risk their lives in foreign countries. We must also accept that sometimes they will say "no". A substantial debate on command structures, evacuation plans and respect for human rights should replace threats about the loss of credibility and influence. That will require a mature debate about the future of Nato, as well as the world's long-term commitment to Afghanistan. The time for that debate is now.

The writers are members of the Democrats 66 party in the Dutch parliament