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AFGHANISTAN'S LESSONS: PART I

The Netherlands' Lessons

Martijn Kitzen

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ABSTRACT: This article highlights the benefits a small military enjoys with regard to networked learning through the lessons the Netherlands' learned while contributing to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Although the force seems to be reverting to enemy-centric thinking, the author encourages leaders to retain an adaptive mindset that will allow the force to adopt a more population-centric approach when necessary.

The Netherlands has been involved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. That event prompted the international community to start reconstructing the country for long-term stability. In addition to developmental aid and diplomatic support, Dutch soldiers started deploying to Afghanistan on January 1, 2002. Since then, the Dutch armed forces have contributed to the international coalition in many different forms and places, including various contributions to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): an infantry company in Kabul (2002–03), a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Baghlan (2004–06), a task force in Uruzgan province (2006–10), and a police training mission in Kunduz province (2011–13). Also, Special Forces and air assets such as F-16s and attack helicopters have deployed in support of these operations as well as the wider coalition efforts that took place under the banner of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

By the end of the ISAF mission in 2014, the Netherlands had participated in training Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in northern Afghanistan as part of Resolute Support, a mission that was extended through December 2021.¹ Since the first Dutch soldier landed in Kabul in 2002, an estimated total of 30,000 Dutch soldiers have deployed to Afghanistan.² That is almost two-thirds of the current overall strength of the Dutch armed forces (39,839 active duty and 5,046 reserve).³

The various contributions to the Afghan campaign have had a huge impact on the relatively small Dutch military. Moreover, this impact coincided with the completion of the transformation process that

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1 *Brief van de Ministers van Buitenlandse Zaken, Defensie, voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en van Justitie en Veiligheid* [Letter of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Foreign Trade and Development Aid and Justice and Security], June 15, 2018, Dossier 27925, no. 630.

2 "Afghanistan," *Veteranen Instituut*, October 2, 2014.

3 *Ministerie van Defensie, Kerngegevens Defensie—Feiten en Cijfers* [Essential data on defense—facts and figures] (The Hague: Ministerie van Defensie, 2018), 26.

reshaped the Dutch military from a Cold War force to an expeditionary organization. Consequently, Afghanistan marked the first serious test for the newly acquired ability to conduct military operations in conjunction with other departments and as part of an international coalition. So, in the eyes of the Dutch armed forces, their contributions to the Afghanistan War were not only vast in intensity, but also challenging in nature, a major experience for a small military.

The various deployments to Afghanistan have provided the Dutch military with a wide range of experiences over the past seventeen years. This article focuses on understanding how Dutch soldiers adapted to the specifics of their mission and to the challenging Afghan operational environment. The Dutch military is encouraged to not only take notice of such observations, but also to explore the ways the military community has disseminated and processed newly obtained insights. In other words, when seeking to obtain an insight on the lessons *learned* by the Dutch armed forces in Afghanistan, one should not only study the lessons *observed*, but also the extent to which they have become lessons *institutionalized*. This article, therefore, answers the question of which lessons the Dutch military has learned in Afghanistan first by presenting observations on adaptation in the field and subsequently analyzing the way the Dutch military has institutionalized them.

Lessons Observed

The most substantial Dutch contributions took place during the ISAF campaign. The end of this North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) campaign coincided with new Dutch missions against the Islamic State in the Middle East (as part of Operation Inherent Resolve) and the deployment of a contingent in support of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. This marked the end of an era in which the Dutch armed forces had almost exclusively focused on Afghanistan. The four-year deployment (2006–10) of the brigade-size Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) stands out as the defining experience during this period.⁴ The mission in Uruzgan province was the largest Dutch military operation since the Indonesian war of decolonization and the first time since the Korean War that Dutch soldiers saw intensive combat.

The TFU experience itself demonstrated that the Dutch military is capable of a high standard of performance in international operations in a complicated environment. Some international observers have attributed this success to the Dutch approach, a subtle, nonviolent way of conducting operations by use of defense, diplomacy, and development (3D) activities that focus on the local population and the government

4 Martijn Kitzen, Sebastiaan Rietjens, and Frans Osinga, "Soft Power, the Hard Way: Adaptation by the Netherlands' Task Force Uruzgan," in *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, ed. Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 159–61.

rather than on fighting the insurgent opponent.⁵ Yet the successful deployment was the result of field adaptations that gradually shifted the task force's emphasis from an enemy-centric, kinetic approach toward a more balanced population-centric approach tailored for Uruzgan's complicated operational environment.⁶ Since a similar pattern is witnessed among almost all other national contingents that contributed to the ISAF mission, the TFU case not only offers an excellent insight in the lessons observed by Dutch soldiers, but is also highly relevant from a comparative perspective.⁷

The first and perhaps most important adaptation of the Dutch task force concerned the evolution of its military strategy. Before the start of the mission, politicians and decisionmakers in The Hague determined the mission's goal as fostering stability and security in Uruzgan. This effort included guidelines prescribing methods for augmenting the local population's support for the Afghan government mainly through civil-military cooperation and reconstruction activities. Combat troops would provide security assistance to create a permissive environment for these activities.⁸ Yet, this provided hardly any tangible direction for implication by the task force. Basically, the TFU deployed on August 1, 2006, without a proper campaign plan, and its commanding officer, Colonel Theo Vleugels was told "to do what we [the TFU staff] told them [the defense staff in The Hague] we would do."⁹ Consequently, the first TFU rotation set out to design its own plan within the framework of high-level policy. Despite this process being initiated during predeployment training, the definitive *Master Plan* was only completed two months into the actual deployment.¹⁰ This plan laid out a military strategy following the effects-based approach and aimed at obtaining 23 key effects in

5 For an excellent oversight of the debate on the Dutch approach see Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, "The Use and Abuse of the 'Dutch Approach' to Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 6 (2013): 867–97. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 198–99; "The Dutch Model," *Economist*, March 12, 2009; and René Moelker, "The Genesis of the 'Dutch Approach' to Asymmetric Conflicts: Operations in Uruzgan and the 'Softly, Softly' Manner of Approaching the Taleban," *Armed Forces & Society* 40, no. 1 (2014): 96–117.

6 For a complete overview of the Dutch Uruzgan campaign see Martijn Kitzen, "The Course of Co-option: Co-option of Local Power-Holders as a Tool for Obtaining Control over the Population in Counterinsurgency Campaigns in Weblike Societies" (dissertation, Amsterdam University, 2016), 329–524. For the population-centric turn in TFU's approach, see also Martijn Kitzen, "Close Encounters of the Tribal Kind: The Implementation of Co-option as a Tool for De-escalation of Conflict—The Case of the Netherlands in Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 5 (2012).

7 Afghanistan: Lessons Learned (conference, University of St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland, February 11–13, 2019). See for instance the various national case studies included in Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, ed., *Military Adaptation*. The text on the key adaptations of the TFU contains some material expanded from Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, "Soft Power."

8 *Brief van de Ministers*.

9 Russell W. Glenn and S. Jamie Gayton, *Intelligence Operations and Metrics in Iraq and Afghanistan: Fourth in a Series of Joint Urban Operations and Counterinsurgency Studies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 9.

10 Brigadier Theo Vleugels (commander TFU-1), interview by the author, November 12, 2009; Belinda Smeenk, Rudi Gouweleeuw, and Harm van der Have "Effect gebaseerde aanpak in Uruzgan, van het schaakbord naar een bord spaghetti?" [The effect-based approach in Uruzgan, from checkerboard to a plate of spaghetti], *Militaire Spectator* 176, no. 12 (2007): 553–56; and Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, "Soft Power," 167–69.

order to increase security and stability in all main population centers over the next two years—initial commitment was until 2008.

Unsurprisingly, it soon became clear that the *Master Plan* was unsuitable as its goals proved too ambitious and its approach inappropriate for facing the complicated neo-Taliban insurgency in a highly fragmented local society. There had been only limited geographical expansion of the TFU’s “ink spot”—the main population centers from which TFU influence would gradually expand its influence—and most of the intended effects were not met as planned.¹¹ Therefore, the fourth TFU rotation in 2008 set out to develop and adopt a new strategy, the Focal Paper.

The *Focal Paper* was not only a consequence of the urgent need for a more suitable campaign plan, but also of the Dutch parliament’s decision to extend the mission for two more years, up to August 2010.¹² Heavily influenced by counterinsurgency thinking, the new plan and its framework of operations clearly echoed the ideas on counterinsurgency introduced in the United States.¹³ Thus, the TFU officially adopted counterinsurgency as its mission. The main task now became assisting the local government in providing a stable and secure environment by maintaining and augmenting the security situation, while simultaneously obtaining the support of the local population.

Furthermore, the TFU would focus on facilitating the development of governmental structures, security forces, as well as development efforts of the Afghan authorities.¹⁴ The new campaign plan combined the military’s methodology of structured backward planning for the long-term with the understanding of Uruzgan’s operational environment acquired in the first two years.¹⁵ This led to the remarkable—yet realistic—insight that Uruzgan, as a province of the new Afghan state, would be sufficiently developed to provide the majority of the population with a middle income and meet their basic needs by 2050 and to have a local government in full control of all development and security efforts.¹⁶ However, the extension of the TFU mission until 2010 rendered this year as the “beacon on TFU’s planning horizon,” and the end state for the TFU campaign, subsequently, was to provide “the first step towards a viable and favourable future for Uruzgan in 2050.”¹⁷ The TFU’s short-term counterinsurgency effort, thus, was to establish an

11 Kitzen, “Course of Co-option,” 419, 427.

12 Kitzen, “Course of Co-option,” 419.

13 Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) G5, “Focal Paper: Foundations For The Future” (unclassified policy paper, TFU G5, Tarin Kot, Afghanistan, July 20, 2008), 7–10; Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, (Washington: DC, HQDA, 2006), 5-3–5-17; and Colonel Richard van Harskamp (commander TFU-4), interview by the author, March 8, 2010.

14 TFU G5, “Focal Paper,” 4.

15 See also Harskamp, interview; and Lieutenant Colonel Wilfred Rietdijk (commander provincial reconstruction team [PRT]-4), interview by the author, September 5, 2008.

16 TFU G5, “Focal Paper,” 7.

17 TFU G5, “Focal Paper.”

underpinning for the Afghan government and its local and international partners to work toward long-term stabilization goals.

Another key element of the *Focal Paper* was its exclusive focus on the main population centers of Tarin Kot, Deh Rawud, and Chora. These districts and their surrounding areas were divided into seventeen so-called focal areas. This allowed for a systematical, event-driven approach for consolidating and expanding the TFU “ink spot,” as soon as the security situation in a focal area would be sufficiently stable, the task force would transfer authority to the Afghan government and security forces and could shift its attention to the next.¹⁸ While this approach meant a huge leap forward in terms of realistic objectives for the expansion of TFU and local government control, its design contained a fundamental flaw as Uruzgan’s challenging terrain dictated the borders of the focal areas.¹⁹ Consequently, these borders sometimes cut through interconnected communities. Nevertheless, the *Focal Paper* was a proper population-centric counterinsurgency campaign plan that provided realistic guidelines and objectives for TFU operations until the end of the mission in 2010.

In mid-2009 the *Focal Paper* went through another alteration as it became clear the mission would most probably not be extended for another period. This ultimate plan, called the “Uruzgan Campaign Plan,” predominantly aimed at creating the unity of effort needed for a smooth transfer of authority to either the Afghan government and its security forces or international coalition partners.²⁰ The plan provided common ground for underpinning long-term stability in Uruzgan by providing an intellectual framework for reconstruction and development and identifying key disablers (spoilers) and enablers of this process in the province.

The “Uruzgan Campaign Plan,” however, was labeled “NATO Secret,” which made it impossible to share with Afghan partners and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the province. Yet, the plan itself provided a proper guideline for the upcoming transfer of authority—ultimately, Australia and the United States would take over. Furthermore, the “Uruzgan Campaign Plan” addressed the problem with the borders of the focal areas as these were replaced by thirteen areas of influence that allowed for optimal engagement of local communities as their confines were determined by following socioeconomic and social characteristics instead of terrain features.²¹

18 TFU G5, “Focal Paper,” 5–6.

19 Although the PRT staff had been consulted with regard to the disposition of communities and tribal distribution, geographic features—traditionally used to divide the battle space in a military operation—still prevailed over societal borders. Harskamp, interview; and Rietdijk, interview.

20 See, for instance, the “Uruzgan Campaign Plan” as quoted in Sebastiaan Rietjens, “Between Expectations and Reality: The Dutch Engagement in Uruzgan,” in *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational Contributions to Reconstruction*, ed. Nik Hynek and Péter Marton (London: Routledge, 2012), 74.

21 See Ingrid van Bommel, Aletta Eikelboom, and Paul Hoefsloot, “‘Comprehensive and Iterative Planning’ in Uruzgan, De ontwikkeling van het Uruzgan Campaign Plan” [Comprehensive and iterative planning in Uruzgan: The development of the Uruzgan Campaign Plan], *Militaire Spectator* 179, no. 4 (2010): 205–7.

Thus, TFU's military strategy had evolved from the rather ad hoc and overambitious *Master Plan* into the solid counterinsurgency plan provided by the *Focal Paper*, and ultimately became the "Uruzgan Campaign Plan," which provided an underpinning for long-term efforts after the Dutch withdrawal. All these plans originated from the various TFU staff rotations, which illustrates the bottom-up character of the military-strategic process during the Uruzgan mission. This lack of strategic guidance from above also echoed in the outcome of the mission. Especially the *Focal Paper* and "Uruzgan Campaign Plan" allowed for the creation of a broad and balanced alliance of local subtribal communities connected to the provincial government. For the time being, this effectively enhanced security and stability as it diminished support for the Taliban among Uruzgan's populace. Yet, due to the lack of strategic vision, this ad hoc political order failed to materialize as an underpinning for long-term stability.²²

The increased comprehensiveness of the TFU's organization encompassed a second key adaptation that enhanced the task force's ability to fulfill its mission effectively. While initially envisioned as a 1,200-strong task force, military planners urged for more troops as the 2006 surge of the neo-Taliban insurgency led to a deterioration of the security situation. As a result, the Dutch military deployed more soldiers, and total TFU strength during the entire mission varied between 1,400 and 2,000 soldiers—with peaks occurring during rotations.²³ The numerical emphasis within the TFU lay on the 600-soldier battle group, which was to provide security, assist the Afghan government and its security forces, and enable PRT operations. This latter unit, while numerically inferior, was key to the task force's success as it was the prime tool for enhancing stability by promoting good governance and facilitating reconstruction.

The PRT was responsible for the development and diplomacy activities within the aforementioned 3D approach. Despite the nonmilitary character of these activities, the PRT consisted almost exclusively of military staff led by a military commander. Initially only two civilians operated as part of this unit, a development advisor and a political adviser. This all changed with the deployment of TFU-5 in July 2008 which saw a surge of civilian staff.²⁴ A total of 12 political, development, and cultural advisers were added to the task force, with most of them operating within the PRT.

22 Kitzen, "Course of Co-option," 517–22.

23 Kitzen, "Course of Co-option," 378.

24 René Bouwhuis, Martijn Bronhorst, "Steentje voor steentje bouwen aan civilisering" [Stone upon stone building toward civilianization], *Defensiekrant*, August 14, 2008; Peter Mollema and Kees Matthijssen, "Uruzgan: op de goede weg, Civiel-militaire samenwerking in een complexe counter-insurgency operatie" [Uruzgan: in the right direction, civil-military cooperation in a complicated counter-insurgency operation], *Militaire Spectator* 178, no. 7/8 (2009): 399–402; Jaïr van der Lijn, *3D "The Next Generation: Lessons Learned from Uruzgan for Future Operations* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2011), 36; and Peter Mollema (civilian representative [CIVREP] TFU-5), interview by the author, November 21, 2008.

The influx of these new advisers was part of a reorganization aimed at strengthening the development and diplomacy expertise of the task force. This reorganization also introduced a system of dual command. From July 2008 onward, the task force was jointly led by a duumvirate consisting of the military commander and the highest-ranking diplomat, the civilian representative (CIVREP).²⁵ This greatly enhanced the status of civilians—and their advice—within the TFU and therefore allowed for a balanced approach that combined military, development, and diplomatic activities. This status further increased in March 2009 when command over the PRT also came to rest in the hands of the CIVREP—in practice, often exerted by the deputy CIVREP.

While the full consequences of this reorganization will be dealt with below, it should be mentioned here that the increased involvement of civilians enhanced the cooperation with NGOs and United Nations organizations. When the TFU first deployed there were only 6 NGOs in Uruzgan. By 2009, their number had increased to 30, and in 2010 some 50 NGOs were active in the province.²⁶ These organizations focused on a whole range of activities varying from health services and education to rural development and veterinary assistance. Dutch diplomats and development workers in the field therefore managed to create circumstances in which NGOs were joining the reconstruction effort and thereby greatly increased the comprehensiveness of the TFU.

The third key adaptation witnessed during the TFU campaign was the gradual shift in emphasis from enemy-centric toward population-centric intelligence. Population-centric intelligence had been included from the planning phase of the mission, yet it was subordinated to classical military intelligence focusing on the opposing militants and the challenging terrain. Moreover, dissemination proved troublesome as the TFU's military intelligence section remained focused on the Taliban despite TFU commanders stressing the need for a population-centric approach or making statements such as "it's all about the Afghan people."²⁷ Even after a specialized tribal adviser was appointed at the end of 2006, this situation remained unchanged. This adviser either met stiff resistance when pointing at the importance of understanding local society or decided that sharing information with the military was of no use and could possibly endanger key informants.

The PRT, however, which held a traditional nonmilitary role, proved fertile soil for the knowledge provided by the tribal adviser. This led to the emergence of a renewed understanding of the conflict ecosystem, which conceptualized the situation in Uruzgan as multifaceted and consisting of multiple layers. Instead of the much-used Taliban-Government dichotomy, the conflict was gradually understood as evolving around political and economic power struggles involving local strongmen,

25 See also Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, "Soft Power," 176; and Kitzen, "Course of Co-option," 443.

26 Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, "Soft Power," 173–74.

27 Kitzen, "Course of Co-option," 404.

former mujahideen factions, various subtribes, and a mesh of solidarity networks interconnecting all these different strands.²⁸

This insight became firmly embedded when during TFU-2 the Taliban launched an all-out attack on the Chora district. Dutch forces managed to fend off the insurgents by first blocking further incursions with the crucial assistance of hastily mobilized local militias and the subsequent staging of a counterattack that drove the enemy from the district. Local allies, thus, were instrumental to the successful outcome of this battle. The effective rallying of their militias by the PRT was a direct result of the thriving cooperation between the tribal adviser and PRT staff, and clearly illustrated the benefits of a thorough understanding of the local social landscape.

The battle of Chora, therefore, created “awareness and an operational sense of urgency to adapt” and, therefore, might be considered the key “adaptive moment” of the TFU campaign.²⁹ Henceforth, the TFU would integrate tribal and political analyses in its military planning process, which enhanced the task force’s understanding of the local operational environment. The aforementioned influx of additional civilian expertise greatly accelerated this process of integration. In 2009, TFU-6 commander Brigadier General Tom Middendorp clearly illustrated the insights that followed from this approach when he stated “the Taliban [in Uruzgan] are less of a threat to the tottering structures of the Afghan state than feuding local tribes and predatory warlords. . . . This seems to have created lasting turmoil which is exploited by the Taliban.”³⁰ TFU-7 CIVREP Michel Rentenaar even went a step further when he declared after the end of his tour in 2010 that not only the emphasis in intelligence had shifted from enemy-centric to population-centric, but that this also had evoked a similar shift in emphasis in operations.³¹

This brings us to our fourth and final key adaptation, the shift in operations from almost exclusively kinetic to a more balanced approach emphasising nonkinetic methods.³² Despite the fabled claims of a nonviolent Dutch approach, the use of force had dominated TFU operations from the beginning of the mission. Of course, the local security situation rendered frequent kinetic confrontations with the Taliban unavoidable. Yet, the absolute emphasis on kinetic operations was mainly the result of the traditional military skills that had been imprinted on the soldiers’ minds. Predeployment training initially neither reflected the complicated nature of the mission, nor the intricacies of the operational

28 Kitzen, “Course of Co-option,” 397–99. See also Colonel Nico Tak, “PRT Briefing,” (briefing, Amersfoort, Utrecht, Netherlands, September 4, 2009); TFU Development Cooperation Tribal Advisor, interview with the author, March 1, 2010; Colonel Gerard Koot (commander PRT-2), interview by the author, December 19, 2009; and Vleugels, interview by the author, December 7, 2009.

29 Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, “Soft Power,” 175. See also Frans Osinga and James A. Russell, “Conclusion: Military Adaptation and the War in Afghanistan,” in *Military Adaptation*, 293–94; and Kitzen, “Close Encounters,” 722.

30 “Dutch Model”

31 Hans Ariëns, “Interview: Michel Rentenaar,” *One World*, April 4, 2010.

32 On the adaptations in the field of operations, see Kitzen, Rietjens, and Osinga, “Soft Power,” 176–81.

environment in which it was conducted. This gradually changed when the insights from subsequent TFU rotations were incorporated in the work-up program and more attention was given to cultural awareness and nonkinetic tasks, such as key leader engagements. Moreover, the final exercise that brought together the various subunits of a TFU rotation (called Uruzgan Integration) became increasingly realistic, as it was supervised by officers who had actually served in Uruzgan.

During the whole four-year period of the TFU mission, patrols remained the main *modus operandi* for delivering effects. Typically, an infantry platoon augmented with a PRT mission team and other elements (including enablers, such as forward air controllers and explosive ordnance disposal engineers) would be tasked for multiday missions, in which they would spend the night at patrol bases or temporary overnight locations. Frequently encountering firefights, as well as the increasing threat of improvised explosive devices, these patrols were forced to take a robust stance. Force protection was bolstered by acquiring mine-resistant Bushmaster vehicles and relying on air support.

While such patrols took place among the local populace, their primary mission typically concerned disrupting Taliban activities, with PRT affairs, gathering of information from the people, and psychological operations as secondary tasks.³³ This gradually changed as more population-centric intelligence became available, and the awareness arose that this conflict was all about Uruzgan's highly fragmented social landscape. From 2007 (after the battle of Chora), patrols were increasingly dispatched to enable PRT activities aimed at obtaining influence over various communities and connecting these people to the provincial government. Population-centric patrols came to dominate TFU operations, a development which was partly accelerated by the influx of additional civilian advisers who provided much-needed expertise for delivering development aid and assisting local authorities. Thus, patrols became the main platform for nonkinetic engagement which greatly enhanced the TFU's influence over the local population.

With regard to large-scale operations, a similar shift can be observed. Whereas the TFU initially had lacked the means for holding the areas it had cleared from Taliban presence, this changed at the end of 2008 when Afghan security forces became available in sufficient numbers. From then on, operations could be planned with the aim of establishing control over local communities in the target area. This was first pioneered during Operation Bor Barakai in October 2008, when at the end of the operation, a patrol base was constructed in order to consolidate the results. Yet, this proved unsuccessful as the base was located at a hilltop on the outer boundary of the target valley. Operation Tura Ghar in January 2009 proved more successful in applying the new approach as it not only established a patrol base in the middle of the

33 See for instance, Lieutenant Colonel Andy van Dijk, "Personal Diary" (unpublished personal record, 2007, private collection); and Captain Gijs-Jan Schüssler, "Experiences Platoon Commander TF-7 in Uruzgan" (presentation, 13 Mechanized Brigade Counterinsurgency Seminar, Breda, Netherlands, September 3, 2008).

troublesome Baluchi Valley, but also included shaping operations, such as establishing “below the radar” contacts with key tribal leaders (of whom some resided in Quetta, Pakistan). Thus, large-scale operations followed the pattern of patrols and increasingly became focused on delivering nonkinetic effects and thereby also contributed to the increase of TFU influence in the province.

In summary, it can be concluded that four key adaptations that occurred in the fields of strategy, organization, intelligence, and operations contributed to an evolutionary process that turned the TFU from a predominantly enemy-centric, kinetic military force into a capable counterinsurgency and stabilization force that emphasized nonkinetic methods for influencing the local population and connecting these people to the Afghan authorities. The key lesson to be learned from the Afghanistan War, therefore, concerns the ability to adopt a population-centric approach—when necessary—from the onset of a campaign.

It should also be mentioned that this approach should be enhanced through logical and lucid strategic guidelines provided by policymakers at the political level. In case of the TFU, however, such clear guidance was lacking. Key adaptations during the Dutch mission were mainly a consequence of bottom-up initiatives by either the TFU staff or its subunits. Moreover, while Dutch soldiers showed a remarkable ability to adapt, the absence of clear strategic guidance and vision from The Hague would haunt the TFU after the eighth and final rotation redeployed.

Due to the lack of high-level coordination with American and Australian successors, the results of the Dutch mission were squandered within four months as the new Combined Team Uruzgan opted for another approach to local affairs which led to the crumbling of the so carefully crafted tribal balance.³⁴ Future missions, therefore, should be deployed with clear political guidelines based on a thorough understanding of the local situation and the conflict as well as the international operational environment in which troops are deployed. Only then might a contribution by the relatively small Dutch military provide an underpinning for long-term stability. Doing so, however, first requires the military to learn the lessons from Uruzgan and be prepared to adopt a population-centric approach whenever necessary. Therefore, it is important to discuss the extent to which the lessons from the Uruzgan campaign have been institutionalized within the Dutch armed forces.

Lessons Learned?

Paradoxically the numerical weakness of the Dutch military is both a strength and a weakness. Thanks to its small size, it possesses the ability to learn quickly from operational experiences through informal information sharing, especially within the tight community of the officer corps. During the TFU mission, this networked learning allowed for the rapid dissemination of new insights from the field. Best practices

34 Kitzen, “Course of Co-option,” 507.

as well as information on the local situation freely flowed through the organization. When the mission proceeded, this process was further stimulated by facilitating the transfer of knowledge between rotations during predeployment training. Yet, this informal character of learning during actual operations comes at the expense of institutional learning, which is notoriously weak within the Dutch armed forces.

As early as February 2008, an attempt was made to capture the insights from the field when a draft pamphlet entitled *Observations on Operations in Afghanistan* emerged.³⁵ This report was prepared by army officers who had served in the first two TFU rotations and in the staff of Regional Command South. These key officers had meticulously recorded their observations on new experiences at the operational, tactical, and technical level. Most importantly, the bulletin emphasized the need to adapt the mindset from enemy-centric kinetic operations to nonkinetic population-centric counterinsurgency warfare. However, for no obvious reasons, this carefully prepared bulletin was never officially disseminated within the armed forces.³⁶ The traditional informal learning process, yet, guaranteed the draft paper was distributed among future TFU rotations and informed predeployment training. The insights of the pamphlet were also to be incorporated into a new army doctrine. Nevertheless, when this doctrine was published in 2009, it was hard to find any trace of the lessons from the field as even the term counterinsurgency was hardly mentioned.³⁷

In 2010, with the end of the TFU mission in sight, a new impulse was given to the institutionalization of lessons from Afghanistan. An official report was published on the performance of Dutch officers and noncommissioned officers in an operational environment characterized by joint, combined, and interagency operations. Recommendations included a better integration of civilian expertise and additional training in counterinsurgency to foster a population-centric mindset.³⁸ These recommendations were echoed in the official governmental evaluation of the TFU mission that appeared in 2011.³⁹ The armed forces themselves had started to collect lessons identified and best practices in order to kick-start the institutional learning process. The army gathered the combined

35 Pieter Soldaat and Dirk Jan Broks, "Concept Informatiebulletin 08/01, Observaties over Operaties in Afghanistan" [Concept information bulletin 08/01: observations on operations in Afghanistan], (draft doctrinal pamphlet, Opleidings- en Trainingscentrum Operatiën, Amersfoort, Utrecht, Netherlands, 2008).

36 Eventually the authors took the initiative to publish the bulletin as two articles in the professional military magazine *Militaire Spectator* in mid-2009. See Pieter Soldaat et al., "Observaties rond operaties in Afghanistan (I)" [Observations concerning operations in Afghanistan I], *Militaire Spectator* 178, no. 5 (2009); and Pieter Soldaat et al., "Observaties rond operaties in Afghanistan (II)" [Observations concerning operations in Afghanistan II], *Militaire Spectator* 178, no. 6 (2009).

37 Opleidings- en Trainingscentrum Operatiën, *Land Doctrine Publicatie, Militaire Doctrine voor het Landoptreden* [Land doctrine publication, military doctrine for land operations] (Amersfoort, Netherlands: Opleidings- en Trainingscentrum Operatiën, 2009).

38 Commandant der Strijdkrachten, *Van Eredivisie naar Europees Voetbal* [From premier league to European competition] (The Hague: Defensiestaf, 2010).

39 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Ministerie van Defensie, *Eindevaluatie Nederlandse bijdrage aan ISAF, 2006–2010* [Final evaluation Dutch contribution to ISAF, 2006–2010] (The Hague: Rijksoverheid, 2011), 111.

insights from all TFU commanders and invited soldiers to submit their experiences as well. For this purpose, 21 committees were established to process these contributions and feed them into the learning process.

Furthermore, the defense staff published an extensive report on lessons identified that were to be preserved for future operations.⁴⁰ Ultimately, insights from Afghanistan echoed in the 2014 army doctrine, which elaborates on stabilization operations, the comprehensive approach, and nonkinetic tasks. The importance of a population-centric mindset is even stressed in the preface which concludes with the statement “operations with and amongst people: the strength of the Royal Netherlands Army.”⁴¹ Moreover, by this time the Dutch military had formally adopted NATO’s new Allied Joint Publication-3.4.4 *Counterinsurgency* as its official doctrine for counterinsurgency operations.⁴²

Thus, it seems the Dutch armed forces had finally succeeded in capturing and codifying lessons from Afghanistan. Yet, lessons have only been learned when they are also incorporated by the very troops that should bring them into practice during new operations. A 2015 study revealed this was not the case; knowledge on counterinsurgency and stabilization had virtually evaporated (even in the case of experienced officers) or was completely absent, and nonkinetic tasks were rarely practiced.⁴³ Training and exercises were almost exclusively enemy-centric and focused on conventional, kinetic military tasks. The traditional, informal character of learning in the Dutch military had prevented the ideas and concepts of the new doctrines to feed back into the units that had initially observed these lessons in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the renewed dominance of enemy-centric thinking and large-scale, kinetic operations was stimulated by the military’s top brass. This, of course, was augmented by the reemergence of the Russian threat. As of yet, the Dutch military again is fully focused on conventional battle.

In the end, therefore, the conclusion has to be drawn that while a lot has been learned in the field in Afghanistan and an attempt has been made to institutionalize these lessons, they cannot be considered learned. At the moment, the Dutch armed forces are caught in a familiar pattern: the pendulum has fully swung back to enemy-centric thinking and large-scale kinetic operations, which renders population-centric concepts and nonkinetic tasks to perceived inferior importance. While this has occurred more often in Western military history, our times

40 Ministerie van Defensie, “Lessons Identified ISAF” (unpublished internal report, defense staff, 2011).

41 Koninklijke Landmacht, *Doctrinepublicatie 3.2 Landoperaties* [Doctrine publication 3.2 land operations] (Amersfoort, Netherlands: Land Warfare Centre, 2014), v.

42 Accepting NATO doctrine as national doctrine has not been without critique. While the Dutch were leading the writing of Allied Joint Publication-3.4.4, this doctrine was clearly the result of a precarious process of international consensus, and therefore, it is not as strong as the American FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* or the Ministry of Defense, *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 (Shrivenham: Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Center, 2009). Although an improved version was published in 2016, the doctrine is still inferior to other state-of-the-art manuals.

43 Sjoerd de Winter, “The Army after Afghanistan” (master’s thesis, Netherlands Defense Academy, 2015), 47–51.

require the urgent breaching of this dichotomous pattern of enemy-centric and population-centric warfare.⁴⁴

Modern warfare typically requires the ability to deal with hybrid threats (state and nonstate alike) through kinetic as well as nonkinetic actions. Current instability in Africa and the Middle East might lead to new interventions in order to foster stability. The Dutch military is exemplary in this regard as it is predominantly training for high-end conventional warfare, but all actual deployments concern either stabilization or counterinsurgency-like missions. Dutch soldiers are still active in Afghanistan, and in Iraq. The time has come to learn the lessons from the Afghan Campaign and imprint the population-centric mindset in the military toolbox so it can be utilized whenever necessary.

44 See also Martijn Kitzen, "Conventional and Unconventional War Are Not Opposites," War Room, March 28, 2019.

