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COMMENTARY

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The Future of Dutch Military Engagement in Afghanistan

by Łukasz Kulesa

Following the recent breakup of the ruling coalition in the Netherlands, the country's military contingent will be very likely withdrawn from Uruzgan province by the end of 2010. While in military terms the loss, although perceptible, will not have a decisive impact, the political consequences of the Dutch move may prove to be of paramount importance for NATO.

A conflict over future military involvement in Afghanistan proved to be the direct cause behind the collapse of the Dutch governing coalition. On 20 February 2010, after the Labour Party's withdrawal, Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende tendered the resignation of his cabinet. A parliamentary election will likely be held this spring, and pending that the government will not take any decision on prolonging the Dutch contingent's mission beyond 2010. This means the 2007 decision to cede responsibility for Uruzgan province security to other ISAF forces by August 2010 and to withdraw Dutch troops from the area by December 2010 stays in power.

When making its 2006 decision to considerably increase military presence and take over responsibility for the southern province of Uruzgan, where Taliban activity was strong, the Netherlands expected allies to give it support and relieve the Dutch troops after some time. The engagement of the Netherlands, which lost to-date 21 servicemen in the Afghan operation, was being compared with the situation of other coalition member states, whose contingents stationed in safe regions in the country's north and west. The public resentment of mission continuation influenced the position of the Labour Party which rejected the PM-proposed formula for prolonging the Uruzgan stay until August 2011 (with fewer troops and the focus on Afghan army training and civilian reconstruction).

In military terms the Dutch pullout will be a major loss, although not one decisively impacting the outcome of the campaign. The Dutch contingent is the 8th largest in ISAF (some 2,000 troops), and its effectiveness has received high marks from the allies. Even if some Dutch forces remain in Afghanistan after 2010 (e.g. F-16 fighter planes and transport helicopters based in Kandahar, teams to train the Afghan army), additional, probably US, troops will have to be sent in, to assume responsibility for the province's security. The United States is currently increasing its military presence in southern Afghanistan, which means it would be capable of replacing the Dutch.

The consequences of the Dutch crisis may prove much more damaging politically. The country cannot be criticised for breaking NATO solidarity, given the scale of its involvement and the losses suffered. But the withdrawal from Uruzgan will heat up the debate within NATO about some countries' apparent unwillingness to back those allies who bear the brunt of the war effort and experience the biggest losses. This will hardly facilitate the process of working out the Alliance's new strategic concept.

No decisions on the pullout of their contingents by other ISAF members should be expected anytime soon. On the contrary, the allied forces are going to be strengthened by some 7,000 troops over and above the US reinforcements. However, most ISAF members assume that this kind of a temporary increase is expected to open the way for reductions of their contingents or total withdrawal from Afghanistan in several years' time. After the Netherlands leaves Uruzgan, other countries may perceptibly speed up the process of ceding responsibility to the Afghans, or to allies who are most strongly engaged in the country. It may be recalled in this context that the present mandate of the Canadian forces in Kandahar province (2,800 troops) is expiring as of the end of 2011. The ISAF mission will be thus increasingly turning into a "coalition of the willing," under US command. This, in turn, will adversely affect NATO's cohesion and credibility.