

# **The Roots of Dutch Counterinsurgency Balancing and Integrating Military and Civilian Efforts from Aceh to Uruzgan**

*Thijs W. Brocades Zaalberg*

At the outset of the twenty-first century, the United States is obviously not the only Western country troubled by the harsh realities of counterinsurgency campaigning. Several of its closest allies, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands, have become embroiled in this form of irregular warfare. On two occasions, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the Netherlands armed forces followed in the wake of a U.S.-led offensive in order to help stabilize these nations confronted with chaos and insurgency. From July 2003 until March 2005, some 1,200 Dutch troops were in charge of stabilizing Al Muthanna Province in southern Iraq. The Dutch operation in the south, executed under British divisional command, had some of the characteristics of a counterinsurgency campaign, but a full-blown insurgency did not emerge at the time in Al Muthanna. Therefore, this Dutch operation cannot be considered a counterinsurgency operation as such.<sup>1</sup> However, in Afghanistan's southern Uruzgan Province, over 1,500 Dutch troops have been engaged in a complex counterinsurgency operation since the summer of 2006 as part of NATO's International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF).<sup>2</sup>

In the colonial days, the Dutch would have referred to these operations as pacification campaigns. Unhampered by elaborate modern definitions of counterinsurgency, irregular warfare, or stabilization and reconstruction, they may have also used the generic term *small wars*. This term, a direct translation of the term *guerrilla*, was in vogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the era of modern imperialism. At the time, the Netherlands was a minor power, but it owned vast colonial possessions. The Netherlands East Indies, the precursor to the state known after 1949 as Indonesia, was created through gradual imperial conquest since the seventeenth century. The Dutch began with wresting a small foothold on Java in 1619, at a time when the Dutch Republic still ranked among the world's greatest powers.

---

<sup>1</sup> In January 2006, Al Muthanna was the first Iraqi province outside Kurdish territory where the Iraqi government gained full responsibility for internal security. The Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH) has started research for a publication on Dutch military operations in southern Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> In December 2007, the Dutch government committed itself to keeping this force in Uruzgan until mid-2010.

They finalized the borders of the state of Indonesia as it currently is with the conquest of Aceh (northernmost Sumatra) and Bali in 1909. On the eve of the Second World War, only British India competed with the Netherlands East Indies in the wealth it brought to a colonial power. The archipelago, with a population estimated at seventy million, was certainly far more important to the Dutch economy than India was to Britain's.

During this process of colonial expansion, the Dutch colonial army frequently met with irregular resistance. Right after the Second World War, the Dutch armed forces again found themselves fighting a guerrilla war during the Indonesian struggle for independence that lasted until 1949. Little is known internationally about the Dutch experience in small wars and counterinsurgency. Professor Ian F. W. Beckett appears to be the only non-Dutch author who, in an English publication, briefly mentions the Dutch experience in his comparative analysis called *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency*.<sup>3</sup> But there is another important reason for analyzing Dutch experience in countering insurgencies. The Dutch style of operations in Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province has placed a lot of emphasis on avoiding the use of military force—or what in modern military jargon is awkwardly called nonkinetic methods. According to Beckett, "A particular army's counter-insurgency practice has so frequently evolved from its past colonial experience."<sup>4</sup> The question this paper therefore addresses is whether there is continuity in the Dutch approach to fighting irregular opponents. Is there a tradition—perhaps similar to that of the British with their minimum-force philosophy—that can explain the current Dutch approach to countering irregular opponents?

### *A "Dutch Approach" in Afghanistan?*

NATO operations in southern Afghanistan neatly match current definitions of *counterinsurgency*. However, the Dutch government officially avoids the term in relation to its contribution to this mission. An American audience is likely to ask what these military forces are doing in southern Afghanistan if not countering the Taliban insurgency. It appears to be a matter of emphasis. At the outset of the mission, the Netherlands government tended to present

---

<sup>3</sup> Ian Beckett, *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency: Armies and Guerrilla Warfare, 1900–1945* (New York: Blandford Press, 1988), p. 153. Another comparative analysis, one that fails to mention the Dutch experience, is David Charters and Maurice Tugwell, eds., *Armies in Low-Intensity Conflict: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Brassey's, 1989). There are many publications in English on the Indonesian revolution and the Dutch political and military response but not from a counterinsurgency perspective. Petra Groen has written an excellent dissertation on Dutch military strategy in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949, and many other Dutch studies on military operations exist, but, even in the Netherlands, little is known about policing and the civil administrative side of the struggle. Petra Groen, *Marsroutes en Dwaalsporen: Het Nederlandse Militair-Strategische Beleid in Indonesië* (Den Haag, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, "Forward to the Past: Reflections on British Responses to Insurgency," *Militaire Spectator* 177, no. 3 (March 2008).

Dutch operations in Uruzgan as a reconstruction effort rather than irregular warfare. Stabilization operations by military forces were only a part of the solution—“enablers” for the real mission: reconstruction of a war-torn society. After exchanging ideas with senior European officers in southern Afghanistan in late 2006, the Australian counterinsurgency specialist and adviser David Kilcullen, slightly uncomfortable with what he heard, called this “a development model to counter-insurgency.”<sup>5</sup>

In line with the emphasis on stabilization and reconstruction rather than combat, the Dutch Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs stressed the importance of “the comprehensive approach,” the integrated civil-military approach, or “3-D approach,” tying together defense, diplomacy, and development. In early 2006, there was even talk in political and military circles in The Hague about a certain unique “Dutch approach” to stabilization and reconstruction that placed extra emphasis on respect for the local population and its customs.<sup>6</sup> From a historical perspective, the latter term seemed rather pretentious. If the direct approach to counterinsurgency is a singular focus on the annihilation of enemy forces with military means, the Dutch—both politicians and the military—embraced an indirect, population-centered approach to countering insurgents, which is by no means unique.

One could raise doubts about political rhetoric matching operational realities on the ground in Afghanistan. The 1,500-strong Dutch military force in southern Afghanistan included a battle group, Special Forces, and tracked 155-mm. howitzers, with Dutch Apache attack helicopters and F-16s in support. The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was officially at the heart of the mission but did not exceed fifty persons.<sup>7</sup> However, even in military circles, little emphasis was placed on the use of military force. The population, or rather, “the hearts and minds of the people,” was considered the center of gravity, rather than killing or capturing the insurgents. In April 2007, the *New York Times* quoted the commander of the Dutch Task Force Uruzgan, Col. Hans van Griensven, in an article entitled “Dutch Forces Stress Restraint in Afghanistan.” The colonel stated, “We are not here to fight the Taliban. We are here to make the Taliban irrelevant.”<sup>8</sup> When it came to applying some of the classic British counterinsurgency principles, the Dutch appeared to be holier

---

<sup>5</sup> Kilcullen quote in George Packer, “Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redefine the ‘War on Terror?’” *New Yorker*, 18 Dec 2006.

<sup>6</sup> On 9 January 2006, the term *Dutch approach* was first officially coined in relation to the mission in Uruzgan by Chief of Defence General Dick Berlijn. Steven Derix, “Zonder troepen blijft de nodige hulp uit: hoogste militair pleit voor missie Uruzgan,” *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 Jan 2006. See also Robert H. E. Gooren, “Soldiering in Unfamiliar Places: The Dutch Approach,” *Military Review* (March–April 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) was officially “built around” the PRT. Brief aan de Eerste en Tweede Kamer van minister van Buitenlandse Zaken en de minister van Defensie betreffende Nederlandse bijdrage aan ISAF in Zuid-Afghanistan, 22 Dec 2005 (DVB/CV-388/05).

<sup>8</sup> C. J. Chivers, “Dutch Forces Stress Restraint in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 5 Apr 2007.

than the Pope. These “classic counterinsurgency principles” include stressing the need for a political rather than a military solution, civil-military cooperation, “winning the hearts and minds,” minimum use of force, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

To answer the question of whether there is continuity to the Dutch history of counterinsurgency operations, this paper harkens back to the two largest and most crucial campaigns in our colonial past: the war in Aceh (1873–1909) and the Indonesian War of Decolonization (1945–1949). In order to allow me to make such broad statements on more than 130 years of history, this paper focuses on one element of counterinsurgency campaigning: the difficulty involved in balancing and tying together civil and military efforts. This element is at the heart of successful modern counterinsurgency operations and appears to be the Achilles heel of current Western interventions. A closely related issue is, of course, the use of minimum or measured military force. This paper focuses on military practice rather than doctrine, since doctrine and handbooks played a minor role during the actual Dutch campaigns, then as well as now. However, the ability to become what John Nagl calls a “learning institution” brought the Dutch colonial army its self-declared moments of glory. It managed to succeed where the Indonesian government and army never succeeded: defeating an insurgency in Aceh. But it took them more than thirty years.

### *Aceh, 1873–1909*

Most Western governments and armies have a terrible record when it comes to learning from counterinsurgency experience. The nineteenth-century Dutch colonial army in the East Indies is a case in point. At the outset of the Java War in the 1820s and every new campaign since, the army advanced in large columns of heavily armed forces, including cavalry and artillery. In campaigns that lasted many years, the army often searched for an elusive enemy and a decisive battle to win. Those indigenous forces that chose to fight conventionally were mostly defeated with ease, but irregular opponents continuously hampered colonial ambitions. Lessons were, in the end, learned by some visionary commanders—those who adapted their organization and tactics to the enemy—but hard-won knowledge was quickly lost between campaigns.

The war that started in Aceh in 1873 was the largest, longest, and most vicious of all campaigns. For more than twenty years, the war against the Muslim Acehnese progressed disastrously for the Dutch. The conflict reached a deadlock by the 1880s, after two failed offensives along the lines just mentioned—the search for a decisive military victory. The colonial army held only a narrow defensive perimeter around the capital of the sultanate of Aceh. This “Dutch Dien Bien Phu,” as one historian called it, came under frequent

---

<sup>9</sup>Beckett, *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency*, p. 12.

attack from fanatic irregulars.<sup>10</sup> The Dutch answer was punitive force that often directly targeted the population, which only stiffened the resistance to Dutch rule.

Only between 1898 and 1903 was the tide turned, partly by employing light and flexible forces, called the *Korps Marechaussee*. These constabulary-type units consisted mostly of Ambonese and Javanese troops led by Dutch officers. They also have been compared to Special Forces. An ambitious new commander, Col. J. B. Van Heutsz, initiated a steady and intensive pacification campaign aimed at controlling territory and the population. Thereto he employed intensive offensive patrolling by small “flying columns” and created a system of blockhouses. Van Heutsz, who would soon become a general, was advised by an authority on Islam, Dr. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. This prominent scholar had done extensive research in Acehese society and became convinced that the enemy was waging an Islamic holy war, with radical clergymen at the heart of the resistance. Apart from being a cultural adviser, Snouck provided crucial political advice and intelligence.

The joint vision of these two men, the general and the scholar, was to break with the massive, “scuttle and burn-type” punitive force. Instead, they propagated a new form of “surgical force.” To use their own terminology: give the Acehese “a sensitive beating” and place “the foot on the neck.” Coercion was needed, but the population was to be treated in a humane fashion. Surgical force was to be complemented by a prosperity policy aimed at winning over these “future subjects.” By 1903, the backbone of Acehese resistance was broken. Van Heutsz, by then a national hero, became the governor general of the entire Dutch East Indies. Decades of relative peace followed after the remnants of resistance were quashed in Aceh and elsewhere in the Indies by 1910. This situation lasted until the Japanese invasion in 1942. Aceh can be considered the birthplace of a new Dutch counterinsurgency method that would be used to great effect elsewhere in the archipelago.

On the basis of this information, one could conclude that the outlines of a more subtle, integrated “Dutch approach” toward counterinsurgency started to emerge. Last year, a Dutch battalion commander in Afghanistan was quoted in the press referring to Van Heutsz’s methods as a source of inspiration.<sup>11</sup> Light and flexible units, measured force, an emphasis on cultural awareness,

---

<sup>10</sup>H. W. van den Doel, “Military Rule in the Netherlands East Indies,” in *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies 1880–1942*, ed. Robert Cribb (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), p. 62.

<sup>11</sup>“Als vlooien op een wilde hond: Oude Van Heutsz-strategie is inspiratie voor aanpak Taliban,” *Elsevier*, 30 Dec 2006. The battalion commander whose unit carries the name and tradition of the Regiment Van Heutsz is likely to have been misquoted. Instead of referring to Van Heutsz’s strategy as a whole as a “source of inspiration,” he told the *Elsevier* reporter that he had looked, among others, at the Marechaussee tactics before heading for Uruzgan in the summer of 2006. He and his intelligence officer also studied the U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program in Vietnam and hoped to apply similar methods in Uruzgan. A correct quotation of the commander can be found in Noel van Bommel, “Lessen uit Atjeh

and intelligence—it all seemed to be in line with what the Dutch nowadays want to be in Afghanistan. So can we conclude that there is continuity in the Dutch approach to fighting insurgencies? The answer is clearly negative. Such a conclusion would be based on a distorted picture of the reality on the ground in Aceh. As late as 1904, after the insurgency in the heartland of Aceh was essentially broken, a six-month campaign was undertaken by a large column into the hinterland of northern Sumatra. Acehnese villagers—men, women, and children—were killed on a massive scale during this particular operation. Between one-quarter and one-third of the population in this region perished.<sup>12</sup>

Although unmatched in brutality, this massacre by Maj. Gotfried Coenraad E. van Daalen was not just an incident. During the crucial period 1898–1903, as well as the following six years, the campaign under Van Heutsz as a whole relied on brute military force rather than enlightened methods. Instead of winning over the population, military administrators exercised draconian control over the entire population. They inflicted severe collective punishment and fines on entire communities suspected of supporting the insurgents. No one other than the infamous Van Daalen succeeded Van Heutsz as the military governor of Aceh. In his hands, the policy of prosperity for the Acehnese people came to nothing.

Obviously, theory and practice did not match. The “Dutch approach” to colonial expansion and pacification in Aceh in this period relied largely on brute force and was highly militarized. In 1904, just after the news of the brutalities had broken in the Netherlands, a Dutch member of parliament complained, “What worries me at this point is that we are moving towards a militaristic atmosphere. . . . We have a soldier for Colonial Minister, a soldier for Governor-General [of the Netherlands East Indies], a soldier for Governor of Aceh.”<sup>13</sup> He could have continued. Also on the district and municipal level, military administrators were often in charge in the more volatile outer areas. Dutch civil administrators were scarce and used only sporadically, and then only in an advisory role. A shortage of willing and able civilian administrators was one reason for the militarized approach, but there was one other. The difficult pacification campaign required extremely close coordination of government and military operations, and the easiest way to achieve this was to give military officers comprehensive civil powers. In the Netherlands East Indies, civil and military powers were united under military command far more often than in British India or with the French in their colonies. This militarized colonial administrative concept was designed for crises such as in Aceh after

---

voor Uruzgan: Hernieuwde Interesse voor Innovative maar ook Keiharde Campagne,” *De Volkskrant*, 12 Nov 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Paul van ‘t Veer, *De Atjeh-oorlog* (Amsterdam, 1969), p. 269.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Bossenbroek, *Holland of Zijn Breedst: Indië en Zuid-Afrika in de Nederlandse Cultuur Omstreeks 1900* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 44–45.

1880. However, it would be maintained in many areas outside Java until the Japanese occupation in 1942.<sup>14</sup>

### *War of Decolonization, 1945–1949*

So what did the Dutch learn from the Aceh experience in the late 1940s, when they tried to reoccupy their colony after the Second World War? They learned one lesson. The reoccupation of the Indonesian archipelago was the number-one national priority after 1945, but the Netherlands did not try to reconquer Aceh. Overall, however, old habits died hard. The Netherlands tried to combine political, diplomatic, and military measures, but ultimately military force and repression became the key instrument of Dutch policy.<sup>15</sup> This may have worked during the war in Aceh, an internationally isolated and geographically limited conflict that took place around the turn of the century. However, it did not work against a nationwide nationalist movement that drew broad support from the population and attracted attention from all over the world. The Indonesian people, seventy million strong at the time, had just seen the Dutch being defeated with ease by the Japanese Army. The Dutch had tumbled from their imperial pedestal and, against the odds, tried to climb back on.

What was the method used? After 1945, the Dutch sought a conventional military solution to the Indonesian nationalist revolt by twice relying on a speedy military offensive. These offensives, euphemistically called police actions, were highly successful in conventional military terms. During the offensive in July and August 1947, the Dutch secured the key economic objectives. During the second action in December 1948 and January 1949, the Dutch armed forces successfully captured the republican “rebel” capital Yogyakarta and even succeeded in arresting key nationalist leaders, including the Republic’s President Sukarno. However, both offensives caused widespread international indignation. They also left the Dutch with immense territories and a massive population to control. Without a proper counterinsurgency strategy, the Dutch failed during the costly and, at times, brutal pacification campaign in the countryside.<sup>16</sup>

Measuring the Dutch performance against the six classic counterinsurgency principles provides a further explanation for the failure of the militarily superior

---

<sup>14</sup>H. W. van den Doel, “De ontwikkeling van het militair bestuur in Nederlands-Indie: de officier-civiel gezaghebber, 1880–1942,” *Mededelingen van de Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis*, nr. 12 (Den Haag, 1989), pp. 29, 48. For an English version of this article, see Van den Doel, “Military Rule in the Netherlands Indies.”

<sup>15</sup>Petra Groen, “Militant Response: The Dutch Use of Military Force and the Decolonization of the Dutch East Indies, 1945–1950,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 21, no. 3 (September 1993): 30.

<sup>16</sup>Petra Groen, *Marsroutes en Dwaalsporen: Het Nederlandse Militair-Strategische Beleid in Indonesië* (Den Haag, 1991).

Dutch to defeat the insurgency. These principles emerged from the British colonial experience and culminated in the British answer to the Malayan Emergency. Many of these same principles can be found in the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*. The Dutch failed on all six accounts. First, they failed to ensure political primacy, a realistic political aim, and relied on military force instead. Like the French in Vietnam and Algeria, they ignored that decolonization after the Second World War was inevitable. Second, they failed to stick to the principle of measured use of force. Artillery and airpower were often used indiscriminately. Although not on a scale comparable to the French in Algeria, summary justice and third-degree interrogation was applied, particularly by Special Forces and military intelligence personnel. Third, they failed to create a successful and balanced mechanism for civil-military cooperation among the military, civil administration, and police. Military rule increasingly became the norm. Fourth, the Dutch failed to separate the insurgents from the population. There was neither a successful “hearts and minds” campaign, nor did the colonial government succeed in effectively controlling the population. Fifth, Dutch intelligence on the enemy was poor. Despite many years of colonial rule and linguistic and cultural knowledge, we did not know what drove our enemy, what the strength of the nationalist movement was, and what the population wanted. Dutch military leaders convinced political leaders that the decapitation of the insurgency, the arrest of its leaders, and the occupation of the rebel capital Yogyakarta would do the job. Finally, the Dutch lacked patience. Hoping for quick results, we focused on two speedy offensives instead of progressive pacification and long-term reform.

Let us return to the third point: civil-military balance and integration. In the course of 1945 and 1949, the role of the army became increasingly dominant in the Indies. The militarized approach of the Dutch to the Indonesian revolt is summarized by statistics. The Netherlands assembled 140,000 troops in the Indies by 1948. This was a tremendous effort for a country of nine million that had just seen five years of German occupation. However, the Dutch failed dramatically in raising sufficient police. There were four army personnel to every civilian police official in Indonesia by late 1948. Much of this police force of only 35,000 men had received minimal training, lacked effective leadership and proper armament, and was at times unreliable. Only 28,000 local home guards were raised for static security duties.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the colonial administrative corps was seriously understaffed. The corps consisted of both Dutch and Indonesian governors, often in military uniform. On Java, 120 civil administrators in 1949 had to perform the job done by 230 personnel

---

<sup>17</sup>Police strength reached its height at only 35,000 at the time of the Second Police Action. Moreover, the number of home guards never exceeded 22,500. Groen, “Militant Response”; J. A. A. van Doorn and W. J. Hendrix, *Ontsporing van Geweld* (Rotterdam: Universitaire Pers, 1970), p. 140; G. C. Zijlmans, *Eindstrijd en Ondergang van de Indische Bestuursdienst* (Amsterdam, 1986), pp. 76, 88.

ten years earlier, which was already an extremely light colonial footprint.<sup>18</sup> In many areas, there was no civil administration to work alongside military units. In the more volatile districts, civil administrators were only given an advisory role, with the military commanders in charge of actual governance.<sup>19</sup> To complete the increasingly militarized approach, special military courts were put in charge of administrating justice by 1948, and the colonial intelligence apparatus was fully militarized.

By comparison, at the height of the Malayan Emergency in 1952, military forces numbered 35,000 British and Commonwealth troops. Police strength reached 28,000 that same year, which meant a ratio of almost one to one vis-à-vis the military. The number of home guards was over two hundred thousand.<sup>20</sup> In Malaya, a successful system for civil-military cooperation functioned on the national, provincial, and district levels. This was the so-called war-by-committee system. Within this triangular system, civil administrators played a coordinating role. Only during the height of the Emergency was a soldier, General Sir Gerald Templer, temporarily in charge of both civil and military efforts on the highest level. In contrast to the Dutch model, the British military performed its role in support of the civil power, and common law remained functional despite the state of emergency. Finally, the intelligence operation was coordinated by the civilian special branch of police.

Due to large differences in the scale of the conflict in the political, geographical, and social contexts, comparing the conflict in Indonesia to that in Malaya is risky. It is as problematic as comparing the Malayan Emergency to the American experience in Vietnam, as many counterinsurgency theorists have tried to do. Nevertheless, as with the Malaya-Vietnam comparison, the result is revealing. They offer a serious warning from the past when it comes to balancing and integrating civil and military efforts.

### *Conclusions*

It will come as no surprise that there is no “Dutch approach” to fighting small wars and countering insurgencies in our colonial past that can explain our current extreme emphasis on the minimum use of force, on nonkinetic measures, and on the comprehensive or integrated approach. While there is continuity in our colonial past from Aceh to the War of Decolonization, current policy emphasis on other than military means is quite the opposite of past experience.

---

<sup>18</sup>C. Otte and G. C. Zijlmans, “Wederopbouw en Ondergang van de Indische Bestuursdienst,” ZWO Jaarboek 1980, p. 182; Zijlmans, *Eindstrijd en Ondergang*, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup>Van Doorn en Hendrix, *Ontsporing van Geweld*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–60* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 9; Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: The Emergency in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 43.

What explains the apparent break in Dutch responses to irregular opponents? First of all, there are two distinct lines in Dutch military and security thinking. In Europe, on the one hand, the Netherlands traditionally embraced a neutral and legalistic policy after the loss of its great power status. On the other hand, in the Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch always tended to be militaristic and realistic. This second tradition ended with our imperial retreat in 1949.

Second, when it comes to counterinsurgency experience in the twentieth century, Dutch history is characterized by discontinuity. In this sense, the Netherlands resembles the United States in various ways. Like the U.S. military—the Marine Corps in particular—the Dutch clearly had an upward learning curve from the 1890s to the Second World War. Nonetheless, both militaries emerged from the Second World War firmly believing in maneuver warfare and in decisive victory. Also, Dutch generals wanted to be Patton or Rommel. Many counterinsurgency wisdoms had been “unlearned” during the Second World War. Both the Dutch and the Americans failed to relearn, in time, how to fight an irregular opponent when faced with a Southeast Asian insurgency. Despite many tactical successes, the war in Indonesia ended in strategic defeat—an experience that will probably ring some bells in U.S. military circles. In the Netherlands and the United States, the Indonesian and Vietnamese experiences left deep wounds in the military psyche. After the frustrating fight against an illusive irregular opponent, the military establishments in both countries firmly focused on their NATO role and embraced preparations for large-scale conventional combat.

When the Cold War came to an end, however, Dutch and American experience strongly diverged. This brings us to the third explanation for the apparent change in Dutch response to insurgency. Even though the Dutch participated in many of the same peace support operations, such as in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, our appreciation of this type of military mission was radically different. U.S. policymakers and the military alike shunned “peacekeeping” as an unwelcome distraction. Dutch policymakers, and eventually also the Dutch military, embraced peace operations as their new “core business.”

In short, when it comes to the use of military force in counterinsurgency operations, the Dutch have had to “upscale” for their mission in Afghanistan, whereas the Dutch, like NATO members, tend to think U.S. armed forces need to “scale down” for this type of operation. This point is, of course, open to debate, particularly as U.S. armed forces have started to embrace counterinsurgency principles and lessons and seem to apply them with some success at the tactical level in Iraq and Afghanistan. When it comes to improving civilian capabilities to work alongside military in counterinsurgency operations, the Dutch and Americans are in the same boat: a long way from where they should be. For all the talk of a comprehensive or 3-D approach, the number of Dutch civilian government officials (political advisers, development advisers, and a cultural adviser) operating alongside

1,500 military personnel in Uruzgan has varied between three and six. One can only hope that the military-civilian ratio is better in the American “whole-of-government” efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.