

Overview

Natural partners and allies

British-Dutch defence cooperation

Nigel Amphlett

“When we in the UK look at the Netherlands, we see a country that looks like us, thinks like us and acts like us. Nowhere are these parallels more pronounced than in Defence.” Those were the words of Dr Andrew Murrison MP, UK Minister for International Security Strategy, during a visit to Rotterdam to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the founding of the United Kingdom/Netherlands Amphibious Force in May. This article addresses the historical ties between the UK and the Netherlands and the challenges that face our countries in the future.

A shared history – with highs and (historical) lows

Of course, Dr Murrison’s comments don’t mean that we are identical. We are two proud sovereign countries, with our own national interests. But we are certainly much closer now than we may have been a few hundred years ago. Our cooperation and like-mindedness having improved substantially since 1667, the year of the raid on the Medway when Dutch forces sailed up the Thames estuary, set fire to the English dockyard at Chatham and then towed away the flagship of the Royal Navy’s fleet, the Royal Charles.

If the raid on the Medway marked a low point in Anglo-Dutch relations, it’s pleasing to note that other historical events are more in keeping with the strong bilateral relationship that now exists. Two hundred years ago, William Frederick, later King Willem I of the Netherlands, landed at Scheveningen after Napoleon’s defeat. He was rowed ashore from the British warship HMS Warrior by British Royal Marines. It was an important event in the history of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and is an event that will be recreated later this year. And I’m pleased that, with a nod to history as well as UK-NL cooperation, there will be a British Royal Navy vessel involved in the celebrations to mark the 200th anniversary of William Frederick’s arrival.

While Willem Frederick’s arrival and the raid on the Medway will be viewed by many as historical events from a by-gone era, there are other more recent historical events that bind our two countries together. The Second World War is the most obvious. Many Dutch people still remember the arrival, in autumn 1944, of troops from Britain and other allied countries to begin the liberation of the Netherlands. Each year British veterans, together with active British servicemen and women, as well as staff from the Embassy, are involved in the many commemorative events that take place throughout the Netherlands. For the UK, all the commemorations are important. They are occasions to remember the sacrifices made by others and to remember the lasting peace we have achieved in Europe over the last half century and more. My staff and I, and embassy colleagues, are proud to attend the large commemorations in Arnhem, Walcheren and Den Bosch, and also the smaller, local events, many of which are the result of the dedication of many of our Dutch friends and colleagues. I am particularly pleased that I will be able to represent the UK Government next year when

we will be marking another significant milestone - the beginning of a series of 70th anniversary commemorations from World War II.

Strategic partners in the modern world

But if our close military ties are rooted in our shared past histories, what about the recent past? And how does UK-NL cooperation stack up now? Are we ready to face modern security challenges and, if so, how are we going to do it?

The answer of course is alluded to in Dr Murrison's comment — our common understanding and shared security challenges bring us together as natural partners and allies in the international arena. That has been evident in a range of military engagements over the last decade, on land, in the air, and on the seas. For instance in our commitments to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, now entering a new phase as members of the coalition withdraw combat forces by the end of 2014 and seek to establish support for a lasting, Afghan-led, peace. More recently in Libya, where the Netherlands helped to enforce the no-fly zone. And in our continuing contributions to the international community's efforts to counter piracy off the Horn of Africa — the EU Operation ATALANTA is coordinated from headquarters in the UK, and the EU Naval Force is currently commanded by the Royal Netherlands Navy from the Amphibious Landing Ship HNLMS Johan de Witt.

Shared challenges

Successful UK-NL cooperation now and in the recent past doesn't and shouldn't disguise the on-going challenges of declining resources and the growing diversity of security threats. On the former, both our countries, like others in Europe and elsewhere, find themselves in challenging financial times. It has forced governments to make difficult decisions on budget allocations, and this has led to reductions in defence spending.

In these difficult times both our countries recognise that we need to find better, more effective ways of doing business and to spend tax-payers money more efficiently. The inevitable consequence is a reduction in the size of our armed forces. In both cases this has resulted in the need for major reorganisation and, for both, the need for compulsory redundancies. In future we will have to generate the capabilities we need with less money. International cooperation will be crucial in achieving this, and it is high on the agenda of our countries and, crucially, our Ministers. Closer and smarter cooperation offers a practical way in which the international community can respond simultaneously to the strategic and financial challenges of the twenty-first century.

Acquiring the capabilities we need in straitened financial times is a challenge for every nation, which is why NATO's "Smart Defence" and the EU's 'pooling and sharing' initiatives are important, albeit the UK recognises that delivering genuine cooperation on capability development across the 28 member states of both NATO and the EU will always be challenging. This is why the UK believes that smaller groupings of like-minded nations can work better. The UK was instrumental in creating the "Northern Group" in 2010 and it committed with France, in 2010, to set up a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force. With the establishment of the Defence Cooperation Agreement, we also see this thinking amongst our Benelux partners. All these are examples of a smart defence mindset in practice. But it's

not a new concept. Bilaterally, the UK has worked with the Netherlands in a joint Amphibious Force (UKNLAF) since 1973, and that is an excellent example of long-standing cooperation that led the way for other initiatives. Established in 1973, it is Europe's oldest integrated force and was smart defence "avant la lettre". Fittingly, the Force's 40th anniversary was commemorated in Rotterdam on 8 May this year by the signing of a new letter of intent on future cooperation. It is another step towards further, and ever closer, bilateral cooperation, promoting interoperability and capability, strengthening the links on maritime counter-terrorism, boarding operations and maritime counter-IED. And whilst the UKNLAF is an excellent example of smart defence, it is not the only one. The UK and the Netherlands are working closely together, with others, on a large number of NATO Tier 1 (i.e. short term) projects under the smart defence initiative. Notable amongst them are: the Individual Training and Education Programme; a project to ensure Universal NATO Armaments Interface compliance during member states' jet aircraft upgrade programmes; the development of reserve-specific capabilities; immersive training environments; and, under a Dutch lead, developing the use of biometrics in military operations.

Defence and security policy

But it's not just about saving money. Our bilateral cooperation and participation in NATO Tier 1 projects are enabling us to realise genuine efficiencies in the way we do business and allowing us to maintaining and developing those collective capabilities we will need in the future to meet our shared security challenges. On those challenges, UK and Dutch thinking is, as you might expect, closely aligned. The UK reviewed its national security policy and strategy in 2010, resulting in our National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). The Netherlands is going through a similar process now, having published its first International Security Strategy in June. This new Strategy was followed in September this year by a draft, complementary, paper on the Netherlands armed forces of the future, entitled 'In the interests of the Netherlands'. This draft defence paper establishes its level of ambition and provides a framework for the future structure and composition of the Dutch armed forces.

In both our security strategies we recognise that the geopolitical and economic landscapes continue to shift and the range of security risks we face continues to grow. As outward facing nations, we both recognise that insecurity and instability in the world affects our own security and welfare, and that together we need to shoulder global responsibilities in order to defend our strategic interests.

NATO and the EU

The end of combat operations in Afghanistan at the end of next year will mark a watershed for NATO, its allies and contributing partner nations. The hard-fought and hard-won lessons and experiences from ISAF, and other recent conflicts, will influence if, who, and how NATO engages and with what capabilities. The UK and The Netherlands recognise that as NATO moves to a contingency based posture, European nations must assume greater responsibility for their own security. To shoulder common security responsibilities, and contribute to fair political and military burden sharing, through our respective defence papers both our countries have committed to maintaining and developing the right defence

capabilities and make them available for use by NATO and, where NATO is not involved, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

NATO remains the cornerstone of the UK's and the Netherlands' territorial defence and deterrence. It remains the world's most successful, and unrivalled, military alliance, based on a shared set of democratic values and a commitment to collective self defence. It provides an unparalleled deterrent and has been a major factor in preventing the re-nationalisation of defence in Europe. The security provided by NATO has enabled the citizens of its member states to live in peace and security, and it continues to do so.

The European Union, through CSDP, also has a role to play in delivering security and improving capabilities. As it has already demonstrated through 28 missions thus far, the EU has a complementary role to NATO in managing civil missions and military stabilisation where its unique spectrum of political and financial levers — the 'comprehensive approach' — can be applied. To avoid duplication, the Netherlands and the UK agree that coordination between NATO and the EU is crucial. The UK's SDSR states that one of our goals is to "foster better EU-NATO cooperation and ensure that both organisations can call on scarce national military planning and civilian resources; sharing expertise and developing complementary, rather than duplicate, skills and capabilities." Similarly, the Dutch International Security Strategy calls NATO-EU coordination "essential".

When we can leverage the complementary strengths of both organisations we can make a real difference. The EU's close coordination with NATO on anti-piracy activity off the Horn of Africa and on training the National Security Forces in Afghanistan are bearing fruit. But we can and should do more. In particular we need to ensure that through pragmatic engagement we pave the way for a fully functional institutional relationship between the two in the long term.

The December European Council (DEC 13) will discuss defence for the first time since 2008 and shape CSDP in the medium term. This is an opportunity to set out where the EU can best contribute to international security and encourage its member states to acquire the capabilities required to act, including, for example, by ensuring the EU's 'Pooling and Sharing' and NATO's Smart Defence initiatives do not overlap or duplicate each other. The Council needs to set out a clear and mutually-agreed understanding of the relationship between NATO and CSDP that will improve the impact and delivery of CSDP missions and operations through existing institutions.

The importance of the EU and NATO playing a complementary and mutually reinforcing role, improving coordination and practical cooperation in supporting international security should be a central theme. With a common membership of 22 nations, their combined output should act as a major international security multiplier to the benefit of all members and help justify what nations invest in each institution. That DEC 13 is addressing the defence industry as part of the wider discussion is welcome by both our countries: it is a major part of Europe's overall economy and must be able to deliver the capabilities our armed forces need now and in the future.

Looking to the future

Although I've only been in the Netherlands for a matter of months, I've already encountered some concerns amongst Dutch security and defence experts about the future. Some of that concern can be attributed to the uncertainty that always arises around major announcements such as the new defence paper. But the recent International Security Strategy was clear in its analysis of the future security threats. Ministers Hennis (Defence) and Timmermans (Foreign Affairs) and their cabinet colleagues remain unambiguous on the importance of the Netherlands continuing to be outward facing in its foreign and security policy. So although the difficult economics will undoubtedly mean that we will continue to face difficult choices when it comes to our armed forces, I am confident that with our shared visions and shared values, the UK and The Netherlands will remain close allies that together will continue to make a positive difference around the world.

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