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NATO DEFENCE PLANNING CAPABILITY REVIEW 2023/2024

THE NETHERLANDS

OVERVIEW

1. In April 2023, the Government published the “Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands”, based on its assessment of the security threats in both the European Netherlands and the Caribbean territories. The Security Strategy is aligned with the latest defence White Paper, published in June 2022. The White Paper provided plans for capability development and defence spending for the period 2022–2026, based on an increase of some € 14.8 billion, including a structural element that increases defence expenditure from 2026 onwards subject to the decisions of future governments. Pursuant to the November 2023 elections, a new government is forming and a new defence White Paper is expected to follow.

2. The 2022 White Paper lists six ‘lines of action’: support, including investment in combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS); personnel and an updated human resources model; strengthening specialist capabilities, with an emphasis on long-range strike and air and missile defence; EU cooperation; innovation, research and development (including space); and, finally, information-driven operations (including offensive and defensive cyber). The programme addresses some significant shortfalls in current capabilities while developing new capabilities based on an assessment of emergent threats and the requirements of the future operating environment. The inclusion of a personnel line of action recognises the need to address the recruitment and retention of personnel, which has been a long-standing weakness in the delivery of the Netherlands’ NATO Capability Targets. The Netherlands is also committed to wide-ranging multinational defence cooperation, most notably its very high-level integration of Dutch and German land forces, and participates in a number of multinational capability initiatives.

3. Recruiting and retention efforts are showing some success: the net loss of personnel has been halted, however, military personnel figures are effectively unchanged over the last two years.¹ The Netherlands is mitigating the shortage of military personnel by employing more civilian staff than the authorised figure; although this does partially compensate for the shortfall, civilian staff cannot replace deployable military personnel. It is likely that personnel

¹ At the end of 2023, there were 40,821 full-time military personnel, supported by 17,896 civilian staff.



will remain a critical limiting factor for the Netherlands' armed forces for the foreseeable future.

4. The proportion of GDP devoted to defence is expected to increase significantly and meet the NATO guideline of at least 2%. In 2024 it is projected to be 2.05% and to remain approximately the same in 2025. Spending on major equipment and associated research and development is expected to be 22.00% in 2024. In 2022, the Netherlands allocated € 570 million for the increase of stockpiles of spare parts and materiel. While expenditure trends are positive, after many years of under-investment, the Netherlands will need to further increase spending if it is to meet its NATO commitments.

5. The Netherlands continues to contribute to operations, missions, and other engagements abroad across all domains. It contributed notably to the Forward Land Forces (FLF) and the VJTF(L), the Standing Naval Maritime Group (SNMG), and the air policing mission in 2023. With respect to the NATO Force Model, the Netherlands has offered forces across the land, maritime and air domains, but it has the potential to contribute considerably more in all domains given its targets.

6. In 2021, Allied Defence Ministers prioritised: a) the development of two fully capable infantry brigades (one heavy and one medium) with associated CS and CSS; b) the development of joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (JISR) capabilities; and c) the development of theatre-level enabling capabilities. While some progress has been made since the last review, particularly in JISR, the theatre-level enabling and infantry brigades have been slower to improve. The Netherlands is targeted with a broad array of forces and capabilities spanning all domains.

7. The Netherlands continues to progress steadily towards implementing its land targets, although the prioritised heavy and medium infantry brigades with associated CS and CSS suffer from shortfalls in firepower, CS and CSS assets, and low readiness (low numbers of personnel, insufficient training, low levels of critical spare parts and BDMs).² Furthermore, the heavy infantry brigade (HIB) is missing a heavy infantry battalion, and more critically, the medium infantry brigade (MIB) is missing two medium infantry battalions and can only be provided at low readiness. The airmobile brigade also cannot be provided at the requested readiness. Consequently, the Netherlands is limited in its ability to fight today in the Land environment, particularly in a collective defence context, although there are national plans to mitigate many of the shortfalls in due course; the Netherlands therefore is encouraged to accelerate its efforts in these prioritised areas. Specifically, it is recommended to procure its own armour for its armoured battalion and to develop the missing heavy and medium infantry battalions. Lastly, the Netherlands needs to invest in sufficient CS and CSS assets to support the concurrent deployment of all three infantry brigades.

8. The principal NATO Capability Targets in the maritime domain are five surface warships at various degrees of readiness, three (reducing to two) submarines, one

² The principal quantitative NATO Capability Targets in the land domain are three infantry brigades (one heavy, one medium, and one airmobile, all at high readiness), and various CS capabilities affiliated with the 1st German/ Netherlands Corps (0.5 of aviation brigade HQ, one attack helicopter battalion, one SHORAD battery, one CRAM battery, 0.5 of IFS brigade HQ, 0.5 of military police corps group HQ, and 2.5 of combined joint psyops task force.), and one light amphibious battalion.

amphibious ship, and eight mine countermeasure vessels. Since the last review, the government has allocated additional resources to the navy's modernisation plans, including several high-end capabilities including long-range strike capabilities. While some gaps remain in the short and medium terms, particularly during transition periods, the navy's current inventory and replacement plans generally meet its NATO's Capability Targets.³ Of immediate concern are the persistent qualitative and readiness shortfalls that negatively impact the Netherlands ability to warfight in the maritime domain today: shortages of long-range surface-to-air missiles and heavyweight torpedoes constrain anti-air and antisubmarine warfare respectively, and enduring staffing and spare parts shortfalls continue to reduce ship availability. The navy is encouraged to urgently fully staff its fleet, increase its participation in NATO training and exercises, increase repair facility throughput, and improve stocks of spares and munitions.

9. Since the previous Capability Review, the Netherlands introduced, or has funded plans to develop, modern F-35 fighter aircraft and MQ-9A UAVs, SEAD and deep precision strike capabilities, modern helicopter fleets, Patriot batteries, and MRTTs. These are major and welcome investments in aerospace capabilities as they make the Royal Netherlands Air Force able to participate meaningfully in high-end NATO air operations against a peer competitor. This large-scale transformation will mean readiness shortfalls during transitions and introductions, but they are expected to lessen at the end of the short term. Therefore, it is assessed that Netherlands meets most of its aerospace targets⁴ with some quantitative and qualitative shortfalls. However, the planned number of F-35s remains insufficient to meet NATO readiness requirements, and personnel shortages persist in several units across the air forces. Additionally, the air-to-air refueling (AAR) capability requested in the short term will be provided through participation in the MRTT fleet, but there are no plans to address the two additional AAR targets requested from 2032. With respect to the agreed defence planning priority, to develop JISR capabilities, the air force fully met the short-term and some of the medium-term requirements three and seven years earlier than requested, respectively. However, current plans will only partially provide the signal collection platforms requested from 2028 (two against five targeted). The Netherlands is now investing in space-based ISR capabilities, which could be provided to NATO in the short term, if required. Although, this will not fully ameliorate the shortfall. The Netherlands is therefore encouraged to continue to modernise its air force and place a particular emphasis on acquiring additional F-35s to fully meet air combat readiness requirements, additional MRTTs to meet AAR requirements, and on the additional ISR platforms in the medium term.

10. The Netherlands provides some of the SOF targets sought by the NATO Capability Targets.⁵ The Netherlands can deliver its land SOF targets at the requested readiness and

³ With the exception of one anti-submarine warfare frigate (ASW FF) for one year, one submarine, and several MCMVs, the navy can provide the maritime forces requested by the NATO Capability Targets in quantitative terms. The ASW FF will not be available in 2025 during the transition from the M-class frigate to the new platform. The navy will only operate two of the requested three SSKs until they are replaced in 2032. There will be a gap of two of the eight requested MCMVs, as there are no plans to procure more than six; further, there will be a gap of four MCMVs from 2024-2028 during the transition from the legacy Alkmaar-class to the replacement MCMVs.

⁴ The principal quantitative NATO Capability Targets in the aerospace domain are 30 F-35 combat aircraft (increasing to 52 from 2028), two air-to-air refuelling aircraft (increasing to four in 2032), three long-range/ballistic missile defence capable air defence batteries (plus two additional long-range and one short-range battery from 2028), and two ISR platforms (increasing to eight from 2028).

⁵ The principal quantitative NATO Capability Targets in the SOF domain are a Special Operations Component Command for Smaller Joint Operations (SOCC-SJO), one Special Operations Air Task Group (SOATG), two Special Operations Air Task Unit Rotary Wing (SOATU-

to a high quality, but there are no plans in place to develop the full SOCC (SJO) requested. Additionally, the Netherlands is currently not able to provide its three fixed-wing and two rotary-wing SOATU targets. However, once the newly procured helicopters are delivered, and the SOF squadron is formed, in the 2028-2032 timeframe, the two rotary-wing SOATU could be provided although at least four years late. There are no plans to address the fixed-wing shortfall at this time.

11. The Netherlands is targeted with over 70 joint enabling capabilities, including RSOM units; medical treatment facilities (MTF) and medical teams; transport aircraft and helicopters; JISR capabilities; supply; ground transport; CBRN; MILENG; cyber; and military public affairs teams and units. Some progress is expected in its theatre-level enabling capabilities (particularly logistics, amphibious bridging, CBRN, CIS, medical, and cyber capabilities) when the plans in the White Paper are fully implemented; however, this will be at least seven years late, which is of significant concern given the importance of the Netherlands' role as a transit nation for the reinforcement of continental Europe under the DDA plans. Further, due to long-term underfunding, several quantitative and qualitative shortfalls are expected to persist beyond this, particularly in logistics, medical, and in-theatre airlift. Additionally, several capabilities requested (including port, rail, air terminal operations units, convoy support centers, staging area support units, transport and supply companies) in the medium term are only partially planned and funded, and will not be implemented without additional financial resources. It is recommended that the Netherlands address its short term gaps in logistics, medical, and in-theatre airlift, particularly its ability to meet theatre and tactical requirements simultaneously; as well as fully fund the capability targets it has accepted in the medium term. These are matters of concern for all Allies as they are critical to assured reinforcement and sustainment for collective defence.

12. The Netherlands is fully implementing its S&R-related NATO Capability Targets of four military training cadres, one police training cadre, and four teams capable of coordinating S&R support.

13. The Netherlands is largely resilient in terms of civil preparedness. If it were to establish a system that prioritises access to communication services and infrastructure by key stakeholders in the event of major disruption, as well as a digital system to exchange NATO information with relevant ministries, the Netherlands would further enhance its resilience.

14. In sum, the Netherlands' capability development trend is clearly positive. Increased funding has resulted in better implementation of NATO Capability Targets including the introduction of some of the advanced capabilities required to prevail in conflict against a peer competitor. In many cases, the Netherlands is making best use of the most advanced technologies. However, significant quantitative and qualitative shortfalls remain, both in the Netherlands' ability to fight today and its modernisation to stay ahead of tomorrow's

RW), three Special Operations Air Task Unit Fixed Wing (SOATU-FW) and two Special Operations Land Task Group (SOLTG) at HRF1, and two further SOLTGs at FLR, and two Special Operations Maritime Task Groups, one at HRF1 and one at FLR.

challenges, and these will only be addressed through additional focus, funding, and personnel. These shortcomings are most acute in land forces.

15. With respect to the three Allied Defence Ministers' prioritised capabilities, the Netherlands has invested considerably in JISR, although plans for capabilities requested after 2028, such as signal collection, are not funded. Theatre-level enabling capabilities are developing much slower than needed. Furthermore, most enabling capabilities requested after 2028, which are essential to the theatre-level enablement of an Allied force, are not planned and funded yet. The biggest concern, however, is a lack of progress in developing the heavy and medium brigades with associated CS and CSS. There are some enhancements through the planned acquisition of new artillery and air defence, but serious structural weaknesses persist with no remedial plans evident. Most critically, the accepted land brigades require three new combat battalions together with associated equipment, and there are no plans to develop these battalions at this time.

16. All solutions will require the Netherlands to increase both the human and financial resources allocated to these capabilities. Recruitment and retention have been a long-standing problem for the Dutch Armed Forces: although recent initiatives have arrested the decline in personnel, they fall far short of addressing serious deficits going forward. Personnel shortages are preventing brigades, ships, and squadrons from meeting NATO readiness requirements and, in some cases, preventing their deployment. Expanding the armed forces and maintaining sufficient specialised personnel, will require greater attention in the future. It will need to meet, and then exceed, these spending levels for a sustained period to provide its share of the DDA combat force requirements. Until the human and financial resources are developed and provided, the Netherlands, as a founding Ally and critical transit nation, cannot deliver the forces and capabilities agreed and expected in contribution to the deterrence and defence of all Allies

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