

Seminar: “Reconstruction Missions in Conflict Territory”

On May 15th Netherlands Atlantic Youth (Jonge Atlantici) co-organised a meeting with the student organisation of the Royal Military Academy (KMA) in Breda on reconstruction. This meeting provided insight on academic discussions about reconstruction and on practical problems arising in the field.

Dr. Ruud Janssens (professor of American Studies at the University of Amsterdam) spoke about the historical context of reconstruction missions. He began by analysing the American perspective. In his opinion the military is unwilling to engage in reconstruction missions, because their training focuses on winning a war, not on rebuilding a country. Politicians are also unwilling to engage in reconstruction. President George W. Bush has made a shift from being unfavourable to reconstruction in 2000 to being moderate in 2003, even comparing the potential of reconstruction in Iraq with the successes of reconstruction in Europe after the Second World War. This comparison, however, is false, according to Janssens, because Germany had a democratic past and Iraq has not. The purpose of reconstruction to the Americans is creating a democratic country. Moreover, Iraq did not provide an immediate threat to national security of the countries now present there, while Germany did, making it difficult for politicians in the present day to gain support from their citizens. In conclusion, Janssens stated that the greatest challenges to reconstruction are not on the military level, but on the political level, since reconstruction is not possible without the political will to stay for a long time and the readiness to pay for the mission.

Dick Leurdijk (Senior Researcher at the Clingendael Institute) continued in this line with a statement by Jaap de Hoop-Scheffer that NATO should engage more in strategic messaging, in order to convince citizens of the importance of a mission. Politicians should also communicate more with the military. He urged the students of the Military Academy to view the letters of the present cabinet to parliament to better understand the reasoning behind the mission. Soldiers should ask themselves what the goal and purpose of their mission is, he continued. This is especially important since soldiers from the same country are sent to a war zone with different mandates. The government has a responsibility to make these mandates as clear as possible. Leurdijk discussed the mandate structure in the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq and Afghanistan. He praised the model of KFOR in Kosovo, because of its flexibility. He did raise doubts, however, about the legal basis for intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Captain Jos Verdonshot (a former commander of a Mission Team of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan) spoke first-hand about Uruzgan, a province in the south of Afghanistan. He gave some examples of his experiences in the first months that he was stationed in Afghanistan, that showed that our western perspective is in every way very different from that of the Afghan people. He explained that the only way to work with the Afghan people is by providing them with security, because otherwise they are too afraid to cooperate. He tried to understand the needs of the people in Afghanistan. While western politicians always talk about the importance of roads in Afghanistan, the Afghan people have another list of priorities, such as water, power, Mosques and education. Politicians should listen to these wishes, if they want to win the trust of the Afghan people. Verdonshot praised the Dutch method in this context, of providing money for projects set up by the Afghan people to help them in their own reconstruction process. This provides them with the opportunity to work on their own priorities and it creates job opportunities for the local population.

The conclusion of the evening was that the communication between the soldiers in the field, politicians and citizens at home should improve in order to enable the two key elements of reconstruction: money and a long stay.

The Netherlands Youth Atlantic could look back on a successful event in which many young participants were informed about an issue that has been very important to the transatlantic community for more than 50 years.

Sophie Bijloos