NATO’s spearhead force

A work in progress

Marja Kwast-van Duursen

NATO’s new spearhead force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), was established in September 2014 to respond to the increasing military threat on the Alliance’s eastern border. Norway, Germany and the Netherlands are providing troops for the VJTF’s interim capability, and the VJTF is scheduled to become fully operational in 2016. At the request of the Netherlands House of Representatives, the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) discussed the VJTF as well as the EU Battlegroups in its advisory report on military rapid-reaction forces. It would be opportune for the Dutch parliament to discuss NATO’s new rapid-reaction force in depth for two reasons.

First of all, in light of the deteriorating international security situation, it is conceivable that the VJTF will be deployed at some point. In the debate on the Defense budget of 12 November 2015, Defense Minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert said, “More so than in the past two decades, we need to take account of the possibility of an Article 5 crisis.” In the second place, it is important for parliament to reflect on its own role in this matter. In the past there have been many in-depth debates in the House of Representatives on parliamentary control over deployment of the armed forces. The implications of this new, military rapid-reaction force, which is still under development, also demand a thorough debate.

Origins of the VJTF

The NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 adopted the Readiness Action Plan, which seeks to enable NATO to increase its readiness, deployability and response speed, in order to reassure the Allies in Eastern Europe and act as a deterrent to Russia. Russia’s swift annexation of Crimea was a wake-up call, demonstrating that Russia is capable of large-scale military action at short notice. Europe’s armed forces are currently unable to mobilize a similar number of units in such a short space of time. For that reason, the Wales Summit decided to restructure the NATO Response Force (NRF). The NRF, set up in 2002 as a rapid-reaction force for initial operations in the early stages of a crisis — both for collective defense and crisis management operations — is being reorganized and expanded to a total of 40,000 military personnel.

With the formation of the VJTF, comprising a brigade with a response time of five to seven days, the NRF will acquire a “spearhead force” that can be deployed on very short notice. Part of this brigade will even be on a 48-to-72-hour notice to move. The VJTF’s significance is mainly symbolic. It will act as a tripwire, to deter Russia from attacking any of the Allies. If the VJTF is not followed up by more substantial military units, its deployment will have little effect. In the event of a serious crisis, therefore, the new rapid-reaction force will be followed up by the Initial Follow-on Forces Group and if necessary the Response Force Pool. These units are equally important as serious deterrents. The NATO-Russia Founding
Act precludes “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” on Allied territory in Eastern Europe. To compensate for this constraint, the VJTF is conducting exercises on a regular basis in the eastern parts of the Alliance. The spearhead force could also be deployed outside the North Atlantic Treaty area, but collective defense has top priority.

**The spearhead force at work**

Much still remains to be fleshed out and organized with regard to the new spearhead force. For instance, it is still unclear how this force will be filled, though France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom have already said they are willing to take the lead in the VJTF over the coming year, as framework nations. Ms Hennis’ comment during a parliamentary committee meeting that “28 for 28 is the basic principle, so all countries will have to contribute whether they want to or not,” suggests there is still work to be done in this area.7

Rapid deployment of the new spearhead force will stand or fall with the swiftness of the decision-making process. Improvements need to be made in this area. During the Cold War, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) had direct control over NATO’s units. Since June of this year, SACEUR can order units to prepare for deployment, pending a decision by the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The NAC then decides on actual movement to the deployment area. The AIV urges NATO to assess the desirability of further changes to the planning and decision-making processes for deployment of the VJTF, so as to be able to respond quickly and effectively to possible threats. The AIV is also of the opinion that it would be useful to conduct political exercises at ministerial level, to identify and resolve issues in the decision-making procedures.

Funding for the new spearhead force has not yet been arranged. At the moment, it is mainly the participating countries who are footing the bill. The letter to parliament on the implementation of the Van der Staaij motion shows that the Dutch contribution to the VJTF/NRF is a costly business. An amount of €10 million has been permanently earmarked in the Defense budget for the additional costs of VJTF exercises.8 The AIV proposes that a common fund be set up to finance the NRF/VJTF. It is unjustifiable for the participating countries to provide all the funding for an initiative that ultimately concerns the defense of the entire Alliance. In addition, a range of practical, organizational and legal problems stand in the way of rapid deployment of the VJTF/NRF. For instance, in many places Europe’s rail network is no longer suitable for transporting defense materiel. During Exercise Noble Jump in June 2015 it became clear that the VJTF has several — practical — hurdles to overcome.9

**The House of Representatives and the VJTF**

Since the establishment of the VJTF, the House of Representatives enquired on several occasions about its implications for the involvement of parliament, yet there were no in-depth discussions on the subject with the Permanent Parliamentary Committees on Defense and Foreign Affairs. This is somewhat surprising, given that in the past the House has made efforts on various occasions to optimize parliamentary involvement in the deployment of the armed forces. Examples are the Van Middelkoop/Verhagen motion, the changes to the “Article 100 procedure”, the Van Baalen Committee, and the Van Dam/Ten Broeke motion.
Ms Hennis has set out in various letters to parliament how the House of Representatives will be informed.\(^\text{10}\) She lists four deployment scenarios: crisis management outside the North Atlantic Treaty area; an Article 5 situation; rising tensions; and scheduled exercises. If the VJTF is deployed for a crisis management operation outside the North Atlantic Treaty area, Article 100 of the Constitution applies and the government provides information in accordance with the Terms of Reference for the deployment of military units abroad. In the event of an Article 5 situation, i.e. an armed attack on one or more Allies, the VJTF may be deployed as an initial response force, in which case it falls within the realm of defense of the Kingdom and its allies. In principle, the government is not obliged under the Constitution to inform parliament, but it has agreed that it will endeavor to do so to the greatest possible extent. “Given the urgency of Article 5 situations, however, it is conceivable that the House will not be informed until the VJTF units are on their way to the deployment area.”\(^\text{11}\) That means the House of Representatives will be informed after the fact. The AIV does not consider it very likely that such a situation will occur. In such cases, relations with the country or countries in question will probably have been strained for some time, and this will have been the subject of discussions between the government and the House. Moreover, the AIV deems it undesirable for parliament to be informed after the fact. The seriousness of an Article 5 situation requires the government to make every effort to inform parliament in advance. Should exceptional circumstances preclude a public debate prior to government action, the House could be informed in confidence, followed by a public debate as soon as the circumstances allow it. “[...] of course I have all your phone numbers and one way or another I would alert you,” said Ms Hennis during a debate in the House of Representatives.\(^\text{12}\) In an emergency this could, of course, be an option, but the AIV would prefer that the official procedure of informing parliament in advance be adhered to.

In the event of rising tensions, the government envisages two possible situations. If an Ally feels threatened, it can request consultations under Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This may lead to preventive deployment of the VJTF or preparation for such deployment ordered by SACEUR. In these cases the government is again under no obligation to inform parliament in advance: “It is conceivable [...] that the VJTF is required to respond to a threat at very short notice, as a result of which the House cannot be informed prior to the VJTF’s deployment.”\(^\text{13}\) The AIV is of the opinion that the government should inform parliament in advance in these situations too, in confidence if necessary followed by a parliamentary debate as soon as the circumstances allow it.

The AIV considers it desirable for the Permanent Parliamentary Committees on Defense and Foreign Affairs to discuss the various scenarios extensively and formulate a joint position on the role of parliament. The AIV also deems it necessary for both permanent parliamentary committees to reflect carefully on the allocation of units by the Netherlands to the VJTF. The government sends a letter to parliament each year listing the units that can be allocated to the EU Battlegroups and the NRF. This letter has to be discussed at length, addressing all eventualities. The VJTF/NRF is a work in progress. It is of the utmost importance for the House of Representatives to monitor it closely.

Marja Kwast-van Duursen is Secretary Peace and Security Committee at the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) in the Netherlands.
3. “With these measures NATO is sending the twin message that no one should doubt the credibility of the Article 5 guarantee and that the Alliance can respond flexibly to new threats.” Quote from the policy letter on relations with Russia. Letter to Parliament from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Parliamentary Papers 34 000 V, no. 69, p.11.
6. Air forces, navies and special forces also deploy this combination of very-high-readiness forces and follow-on forces.
7. Report of the meeting of 30 September 2015 between the Minister of Defense and the Permanent Parliamentary Committees on Defense and Foreign Affairs, to discuss the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defense of 8 October 2015.
8. Letter to Parliament from the Minister of Defense to the President of the House of Representatives on the implementation of the measures to enhance the basic readiness of the armed forces, The Hague, 9 November 2015, p.3.
9. Legislation has to be amended, permits must be granted, and international agreements have to be made on troop movements.
12. Report of the meeting of 30 September 2015 between the Minister of Defense and the Permanent Parliamentary Committees on Defense and Foreign Affairs, to discuss the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defense of 8 October 2015.