

IOB Evaluation

Between wish and reality

Evaluation of the Dutch contribution to
Resolute Support

March 2023

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Camp Marmal in Mazar-e Sharif

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Camp Marmal in Mazar-e Sharif

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Flags at Camp KAIA (Kabul International Airport) of countries taking part in Resolute Support

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A Dutch adviser meets his Afghan counterpart

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Two Dutch advisers visiting an Afghan Colonel

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Training in Mazar-e Sharif by the Dutch Mobile Medical Team with Croatian force protection

Summary

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2021, the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) took place in Afghanistan. The mission focused on training, advising and assisting officers of the Afghan armed forces and police (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ANDSF) and officials in the Afghan ministries of Interior and Defense. The objective of the mission was to create a professional and self-reliant Afghan security apparatus that would be able to independently maintain security and permanently resist the Taliban and other insurgents. The Netherlands contributed to the mission with 100-160 people at a time, including advisers, staff officers, Force Protection units, and logistical and medical support staff.

Dutch contributions to missions under Article 100 of the Dutch Constitution are subject to an obligation to evaluate the deployment after it has been completed. The present evaluation was conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (*directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie, IOB*), the independent evaluation directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The central research questions were:

To what extent were the objectives of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support achieved, how can this be explained, and what lessons can be learned for future Dutch mission contributions?

The study consisted of 118 interviews, a literature review, and an analysis of internal documents from the relevant Dutch ministries, the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service (*Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, MIVD*), and NATO. The present summary gives a brief overview of the main findings and recommendations of the evaluation.

Conclusions, and recommendations to the Cabinet

The main objective of Resolute Support was not achieved after the unilateral US withdrawal and the end of the mission.

In August 2021, the Taliban took power from the government in Afghanistan. The main objective of RSM—to create a self-reliant Afghan security apparatus that could permanently resist the Taliban—was not realised. The immediate reason for this was the unilateral decision by the United States to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan, thus terminating RSM de facto, even though it was known that the ANDSF were not yet capable of providing security on their own.

During the mission, RSM was also not on track to achieve its objectives.

During the mission, RSM was also not on track to achieve its objectives. The Taliban gained control of more and more territory during the entire period of the mission, and there is no evidence that the self-reliance or professionalism of the Afghan armed forces and police improved structurally over the course of the mission. The ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors, and continued experiencing major problems with key functions such as supply, command and control, and logistics. In addition, the ANDSF continued to suffer from widespread corruption, high turnover, and heavy casualties, as well as poor morale and low combat readiness on the part of troops.

The Netherlands contributed to a limited extent to the professionalisation of individual ANDSF officers, but not to structural improvements in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.

During the mission, Dutch advisers took small steps to help improve the professional skills of individual officers. Most progress in this regard was observed in the training of the Afghan Special Security Forces unit ATF-888 by Dutch and German special operations forces, starting in 2018. However, these steps did not lead to any structural progress in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.

Long-term problems in Afghanistan hampered the effectiveness of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM.

A number of factors that played out more broadly and over a longer period than RSM limited the effectiveness of the mission, and of the Dutch contribution to it. Starting in 2001, the international coalition tried to build an Afghan state based on a Western model that did not fit the Afghan reality—a state over which both the population and government officials felt limited ownership. The large influx of foreign money created a rentier state that fostered patronage networks, nepotism, and large-scale corruption. The poor security situation made it especially difficult to build a security apparatus, because soldiers and police officers were needed to fight even as they were still being trained. The ANDSF were equipped with modern, maintenance-intensive weapons systems, with the result that the ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors with specialist knowledge.

These factors were known before RSM started, and they made it unlikely that RSM would achieve its objectives. However, in the decision by the Cabinet to take part in RSM, the question to which extent it could be expected that RSM would achieve its stated objectives played a secondary role. More important to the Cabinet were the wish to show solidarity to its allies and to cooperate with Germany. The mission was also seen as relatively safe, limited in scope, and entailing little political risk. Moreover, the NATO allies wanted to reduce their military presence in Afghanistan, and there was no alternative to RSM for which there was sufficient support within NATO.

Recommendations for future mission contributions:

- 1a. Be realistic about what training and advisory missions can achieve when deciding whether to participate, or keep participating, in international missions and when formulating, for any Dutch mission contribution, its objectives, the expectations for it, and the grounds for it.
- 1b. In applying the assessment framework for the deployment of military units, be clear about the extent to which it can be expected that the objectives of the mission to which the Netherlands is contributing will be achieved given the resources available. That would fit, for instance, within the passages on feasibility and risk in the assessment framework.

Problems with the mission's design and execution also hampered the effectiveness of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM.

Several problems with mission design and execution hampered the effectiveness of both the Dutch contribution to RSM and that of other countries: a lack of specific objectives for the advisers and their Afghan counterparts; a lack of appropriate guidance and monitoring of progress by NATO; too few moments of contact between advisers and their counterparts; and a lack of motivation among many Afghan counterparts. In addition, Dutch advisers, like those from several other countries, were usually deployed for a period of six months, which was too short to be effective.

Recommendations for future mission contributions:

2. Do not send out individual advisers or trainers for one-off periods of six months in missions where building a good working relationship and monitoring progress over the long term are important.
3. In the context of any comparable training missions in the future, urge NATO to set concrete objectives and give specific guidance for the trainers and advisers who are to be deployed.

The progress of the mission was presented too positively by both NATO and the Netherlands.

Within NATO, and also in the Netherlands, during the mission, the progress achieved in strengthening the ANDSF and the developments in the security situation in Afghanistan were presented more positively than was warranted by the facts. This was the case in reports from the field to NATO Headquarters and in reports by NATO to member states and the outside world. It was also the case in reports from the Cabinet to the House of Representatives, mainly in the years of the mission up to 2020. A collective wishful thinking emerged in which staff within the NATO organisation and in participating countries stuck to the same positive narrative even though the evidence did not support this, and in which they did not pay enough heed to the signs that not all was well.

Recommendations for future mission contributions:

- 4a. Urge NATO to properly monitor and transparently report on missions.
- 4b. Report both positive and negative issues in a transparent manner: from the field to ministries and from ministries to the House of Representatives.
- 4c. Introduce independent mid-term reviews or independent monitoring of Dutch mission contributions.

Dutch grounds for participation in Resolute Support were too ambitious and were insufficiently substantiated.

As justification for its decision to participate in the mission, the cabinet formulated a number of 'grounds for participation': allied solidarity; countering migration; preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism; and consolidating economic growth, human rights, and the rule of law in Afghanistan. With the exception of allied solidarity, the grounds for participating were very diverse and ambitious, given the relatively small contribution to the mission: 100-160 people at a time. They were also based on assumptions about the effects of the mission contribution—assumptions that were not substantiated by the cabinet and that were, in some cases, questionable. This type of 'grounds for participation' makes it difficult for the Cabinet to account for the extent to which a mission deployment actually contributes to the ambitions to which the deployment is supposed to contribute.

Recommendations for future mission contributions:

- 5a. It can be appropriate for the Cabinet to set out the broader vision towards a country in letters to the House of Representatives about contributions to a mission. But if 'grounds for participation' are formulated as objectives of a mission contribution, it should be ensured that they are well substantiated, and that the only grounds that are mentioned are those that can reasonably be shown to have a causal relationship with the mission contribution.
- 5b. Be clear about what specific results are expected from the Dutch contribution to a mission: the objectives of the contribution should be precisely formulated, should preferably be measurable, and should be realistic given the available resources and the context of the mission.



Introduction

1.1 Background and relevance

In August 2021, the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. This coincided with the end of a large-scale international military presence in the country, which had been there for 20 years. This presence began when, in response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States (US) overthrew the Taliban regime for harbouring al-Qaeda. A national interim government was then established under a UN mandate, as was a stability mission: the *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF). In the years that followed, the new Afghan state continued to take shape. Among other things, national elections were organised and national institutions were built up, including ministries, a military force, and police force. This was largely funded with foreign money, and involved several international military and police missions.

The last of these missions was NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM), which took place from early 2015 to early September 2021.¹ The Netherlands was among the countries that participated in RSM. Its participation included advisers, logistical- and medical- support officers, staff officers, and *force-protection units* (military security guards for the advisers).

Dutch contributions to missions under Article 100 of the Dutch Constitution¹ are subject to an obligation to evaluate the deployment after it has been completed.ⁱⁱ This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the Dutch contribution to RSM. The evaluation was conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (*directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie, IOB*), the independent evaluation directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This is an opportune time for the present evaluation. The government has stated its intention to increase the readiness and deployability of the armed forces for contributions to international missions and operations.ⁱⁱⁱ For example, the Netherlands is currently contributing military personnel to training missions in Iraq² and to an EU training mission to strengthen the Ukrainian armed forces. Dutch military personnel are also helping train Ukrainian soldiers in the United Kingdom.^{iv} The government has indicated that lessons learned from previous mission contributions should be a structural component in the decision-making process regarding new mission contributions.^v This evaluation offers such lessons.

1.2 Objectives of the Dutch contribution to RSM

Resolute Support was a training mission focused on training, advising, and assisting officers in the armed forces, the police, and related institutions in Afghanistan. Its objective was to create a “professional and self-reliant security apparatus that can, also in the long run, independently maintain security and permanently resist the insurgents”.^{vi}

‘The insurgents’ referred particularly³ to the Taliban, who had never completely disappeared from Afghanistan after the overthrow of their regime in 2001, and who continued to challenge the authority of the Afghan government. From 2005, they regularly attacked the Afghan army, the Afghan police and international military personnel in Afghanistan, carrying out attacks on civilians and government officials, among others.

In announcing that the Netherlands would be participating in RSM, the Cabinet wrote that it had not formulated independent objectives for the contribution, but would follow the objectives NATO had established.^{vii} However, the Cabinet did state that the Netherlands would be participating on various grounds: to help prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a sanctuary for terrorism; to reduce migration from Afghanistan; to contribute to human rights, economic growth, and the rule of law in the country; and to further allied solidarity within NATO.^{viii}

¹ Article 100 missions are those in which the armed forces are deployed to maintain or promote the international rule of law. Article 100 of the Constitution states that the cabinet must inform parliament in advance of such deployments unless compelling reasons dictate otherwise.

² These include military contributions to Operation Inherent Resolve by the anti-ISIS coalition, NATO Mission Iraq, EU Advisory Mission Ukraine, and the placement of a military advisor at the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. See the parliamentary letter on the Dutch contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition and the broad security deployment in Iraq, 18 May 2022, Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 911.

³ Besides the Taliban, there were other groups, such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Al-Qaeda. However, the Taliban were by far the largest rebel group in the period from 2001 to 2021. See, for example, Giustozzi, A., ‘The Taliban at War 2001–2018’, Oxford University Press, 2019, and Rubin, B. R., ‘Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know’, Oxford University Press, 2020, Chapter 9: ‘More War, Insurgency, and Counterinsurgency’.

1.3 The central research questions and structure of the report

The central questions of this evaluation are as follows:⁴

To what extent were the objectives of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support achieved, how can this be explained, and what lessons can be learned for future Dutch mission contributions?

These questions are answered as follows in this report:

- Chapter 2 provides a factual description of the background, set-up, implementation, and end of RSM and the Dutch contribution to it;⁵
- Chapter 3 sets out the extent to which the objectives of RSM and the Dutch contribution to it were achieved during and after the mission.⁶ It looks primarily at the official purpose of RSM, but it also includes a brief discussion of the grounds the Netherlands formulated for participating in the mission;
- Chapter 4 sets out the factors that influenced the extent to which the objectives of RSM and the Dutch contribution to it were achieved;⁷
- Chapter 5 presents the conclusions of the study, as well as lessons that can be learned for future Dutch mission contributions.⁸

1.4 Methodology

This is a special evaluation. Indeed, given the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021, it will be clear from the outset that the long-term objective of the mission was not achieved: to create an Afghan security apparatus that could, on its own, have resisted the Taliban and other insurgents. That being said, several factors contributed to this, including some that were beyond the ambit of RSM. Therefore, in this evaluation, we also look at the extent to which, while RSM and the Dutch contribution to it were in progress, they were on track to achieve their objectives.

The findings in this report are based on sources of various types:

- Internal documents and correspondence from the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Justice and Security, and from NATO;
- Publicly available literature (analysis conducted in part by the Clingendael Institute);
- 118 interviews with stakeholders: Dutch military and police officers deployed to Afghanistan (48); Afghan counterparts of Dutch advisers (15); Dutch staff at NATO headquarters in Brussels (7); NATO staff and other partners from other NATO countries (7); staff from the Netherlands embassy in Afghanistan (9); staff from the MIVD (4); and Netherlands-based staff from the ministries of Defence (16) and Foreign Affairs (9), and the ministry of Justice and Security and the National Police (3).

⁴ See the Terms of Reference of this evaluation (in Dutch): (www.iob-evaluatie.nl/publicaties/terms-of-reference/2021/12/15/tor-evaluatie-nederlandse-bijdrage-rsm).

⁵ Subquestion 1a: What were the objectives of the Dutch contribution to RSM? and 1b: What means and methods did the Netherlands deploy to achieve these objectives; how and when were these means deployed; why were they chosen, and what assumptions were they based on?

⁶ Subquestion 2a: To what extent were the objectives that were set for the Dutch contribution met, in terms of activities and output? and 3a: To what extent have the objectives of RSM been achieved, in terms of outcomes and impact?

⁷ Subquestion 2b: What went well, and what less well, in the effort to achieving the objectives, in terms of activities and output, of the Dutch contribution? and 3b: What factors influenced the extent to which the objectives of RSM were achieved, in terms of outcomes and impact?

⁸ Subquestion 2c: To what extent can it be said that the Dutch contribution to RSM managed to contribute to achieving the objectives and ambitions that had been set at the level of the overall mission? and 4: What lessons can be drawn for (a) decision-making on, and (b) the set-up, implementation, and winding down of future Dutch mission contributions?

- A more-detailed description of the research methods used, and of the methodological limitations of the study, can be found as a separate publication on IOB's website (in Dutch): www.iob-evaluatie.nl/resultaten/publicaties/rapporten/2023/05/19/nederlandse-bijdrage-resolute-support.



Factual description of RSM and of the Dutch contribution to it

Summary

- The NATO Resolute Support Mission took place from January 2015 to September 2021 in Afghanistan. The mission focused on training, advising and assisting officials of the ANDSF - the Afghan armed forces and police - and the ministries of Interior and Defence.
- The aim was to ensure that the ANDSF would become professional and self-reliant, and that it would thus be able, on its own, to maintain security and resist the Taliban and other insurgents, also in the long run. The intention was that this would make it possible for NATO allies to withdraw from Afghanistan, where they had been operating militarily since 2001.
- RSM was initially supposed to last two years, until the end of 2016. Because insufficient progress was made, however, NATO decided to extend the mission beyond 2016. This extension was indefinite: the mission was to last until the ANDSF was ready to see to security on its own.
- Over the years, RSM consisted of 11,000 to 17,000 troops, including 1,200 to 1,400 advisers. Forty-two countries contributed troops. By far the largest individual contribution came from the United States.

- The Netherlands contributed to RSM throughout the mission. Chief among the reasons for participating were the wish to show allied solidarity, and the opportunity to cooperate with Germany. In addition, the Netherlands had been militarily active in Afghanistan since 2002, and compared to previous missions, the contribution to RSM was seen as relatively safe, limited in scope, and entailing little political risk.
- The Dutch contribution between 2015 and 2018 consisted of up to 100 military personnel at a time. These included up to 10 advisers, a number of staff officers at NATO and, mostly, support personnel such as force-protection units and medical and logistical support staff. From 2018, the Dutch contribution was expanded to include a small number of police officers and up to 60 special operations forces to train an Afghan special police unit.
- Starting in late 2019/early 2020, RSM and the Dutch contribution to it were gradually scaled back. This was partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic and partly because of negotiations that were taking place between the US and the Taliban. These negotiations led to the Doha agreement in February 2020, which stated that, by 1 May 2021, all foreign troops would leave Afghanistan.
- In April 2021, President Biden announced that he would effectively withdraw all US troops in September of that year. The overall withdrawal of RSM troops was subsequently set in train. As international forces withdrew, the Taliban gained ground faster and faster, and on 15 August they took control of the government in Kabul without resistance from the ANDSF.

This chapter first describes the Resolute Support Mission and then the Dutch contribution to the mission.

2.1 Factual description of RSM

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Background to RSM

Overthrow of the Taliban regime

Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Article 5, which states that an attack on one Ally is considered an attack on all, was invoked for the only time in NATO's history. NATO allies declared solidarity with the US.^x Shortly after the attacks, President Bush announced the US *War on Terror*.^x As part of this, the US overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001 for harbouring Al-Qaeda.⁹

A new Afghan interim government was formed at a UN conference in Bonn on 5 December 2001. This government was for a large part made up of warlords whose militias had fought alongside the Americans against the Taliban.^{10 xi} A UN resolution created a mandate for the creation of ISAF. ISAF's aim was initially to secure Kabul and its immediate surroundings and to help the new interim Afghan government to train new Afghan security forces.¹¹

⁹ The American invasion of Afghanistan was part of *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF). The Taliban were overthrown within three months by US bombing and US special forces working with, among others, Afghan fighters from the Northern Alliance. In the years following the overthrow of the Taliban, OEF remained focused on counterterrorism against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. See Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Department of Defense (SIGAR) (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 12.

¹⁰ The outcome of the Bonn conference was the 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions'. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, was put forward as leader of the interim government, but the Northern Alliance was given the most important ministerial posts. Muhammad Fahim became Minister of Defense; Yunus Qanuni, Interior Minister; and Abdullah Abdullah, Foreign Minister. All three are ethnic Tajiks.

¹¹ On 20 December 2001, the Security Council voted unanimously to adopt Resolution 1386, approving the establishment of ISAF. See UNSCR, Resolution 1386, 'The Situation in Afghanistan', 20 December 2001 (<http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1386>).

Building up the Afghan security forces during ISAF

In 2003, NATO took over the leadership of ISAF from the UN.^{xii} Over the years, ISAF grew from a relatively small mission in and around Kabul to a mission across Afghanistan with an ever-expanding mandate.^{xiii} NATO and the wider international community increasingly focused on building Afghan state institutions.^{xiv} Besides ISAF, several bilateral and multilateral missions and initiatives were set up to build up the armed forces and police: the ANDSF.¹²

Between 2001 and 2014, the ANDSF were built up to a force of nearly 340,000.¹³ Training Afghan security forces was difficult in the first few years after the Bonn agreement.^{xv} Moreover, from 2005, the Taliban returned as a rebel movement, and the overall security situation deteriorated.^{xvi} ISAF troops clashed more and more with the Taliban from that point on. Partly for this reason, the US wanted to accelerate the build-up of the Afghan armed forces and police.^{xvii} Troop numbers grew rapidly. At the same time, there was high turnover within the ANDSF, for instance because soldiers and officers died or left the ANDSF. Between 2004 and 2014, the monthly attrition rate was between two and three per cent. As a result, the ANDSF lost a quarter to a third of its troops every year.¹⁴ ^{xviii} In addition, there was widespread corruption within the Afghan government, and limited Afghan ownership of the new state institutions (see also Chapter 4).^{xix}

Due to disappointing results and declining political support within NATO countries for the efforts in Afghanistan, the US and NATO started looking more and more for a way out of Afghanistan.^{xx} However, there were concerns that withdrawing too soon would wipe out investments made and give the Taliban a chance to return to power. In late 2009, the US and NATO allies therefore sent additional troops to Afghanistan to reverse the Taliban's momentum.¹⁵ ^{xxi}

Transition

In 2011, US and NATO troop numbers peaked at over 130,000. A transition was initiated that year, with the objective to hand over responsibility for security to the Afghan armed forces and police.^{xxii} In addition to ISAF's combat-oriented role, even more attention was paid to training and equipping the ANDSF to strengthen their capabilities.^{xxiii}

Between 2012 and 2014, the US and NATO presence was scaled back considerably.^{xxiv} More than 100,000 troops were withdrawn. In June 2013, responsibility for security in Afghanistan was formally transferred from NATO to the Afghan government.^{xxv} Although the Afghan government was formally in charge from then on, the ANDSF still proved unable to operate properly without foreign support. Moreover, the Taliban were gaining ground again.^{xxvi} It was therefore deemed necessary to launch a new NATO mission after the end of ISAF's mandate in December 2014.

At the request of the Afghan government, a smaller, non-combat mission was launched by NATO: RSM.^{xxvii} This mission was intended to make it possible for NATO and the US to eventually withdraw further from Afghanistan.^{xxviii}

¹² The ANDSF are referred to in some publications as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). In 2002, five countries became responsible for reforming the Afghan security sector. The US took the lead in building the military, Germany in policing, Italy in judicial reform, the UK in counter-narcotics, and Japan in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. For a comprehensive overview of the various missions and initiatives, see SIGAR (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR.

¹³ Of this total number, an estimated 178,617 people served in the Afghan National Army, 153,317 in the Afghan National Police (ANP), and 6,922 in the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in August 2014. These figures are based on data from ISAF. See SIGAR (2014), 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 October 2014', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 92.

¹⁴ It did happen that the same people joined the armed forces or police several times over the years.

¹⁵ The increase in troop numbers to more than 130,000 was prompted by a US change of course in Afghanistan policy under President Obama that came to be known as *The Surge*.

How RSM was structured

Training, Advice, and Assistance (TAA) for the upper cadres

The TAA that had first been offered to the ANDSF under the ISAF mandate, was continued during RSM. However, whereas ISAF was for a large part about training the lower cadres of the armed forces and the police, RSM gave TAA to senior officials within the ANDSF and to staff of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence.^{xxix}

Troop numbers

RSM consisted of about 13,000 troops at the beginning, but this number fluctuated between about 11,000 and 17,000 throughout the years of the mission.^{xxx} Although Resolute Support was a TAA mission, somewhere between 1,200 to 1,400 of the total number of troops were advisers.^{xxxi} The rest consisted of staff officers and support staff, including medical and logistics support staff and force-protection units.¹⁶ At any given time between 2015 and 2021, between 36 and 42 countries were supplying troops to RSM.^{xxxii} By far the largest individual contribution came from the United States, which contributed at any given time between 6,800 and 8,400 troops to RSM.¹⁷

Three phases

RSM started on 1 January 2015, and had a two-year mandate. The plan was to work through a 'hub and spokes model' in phase 1 of the mission (see Figure 1 on the next page). In this, Kabul formed the central 'hub' and the 'spokes' consisted of training centres in northern, eastern, southern and western Afghanistan. Germany was in charge in the north, the US in the south and east, Italy in the west, and Turkey in Kabul.¹⁸ It was planned that RSM would move to phase 2 of the mission after a year, in which the 'spokes' would be closed and advice would be provided only from Kabul.^{xxxiii} The intention was that, after another year, the ANDSF would be able to operate independently and the mission could move to phase 3: withdrawal of RSM military personnel from Afghanistan.

¹⁶ This applies to the period from 2015 to 2020. Starting in February 2020, the number of NATO military personnel was scaled back. See NATO, 'RSM Placemats Archive' (www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/107995.htm); Parliamentary letter Combatting International Terrorism, 26 November 2020, Parliamentary Paper 27925, no 756, p 1.

¹⁷ This applies to the period from 2015 to 2020. In the last six months of 2020, the US decided to reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 2,500. See NATO, 'RSM Placemats Archive' (www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/107995.htm); Parliamentary letter Combatting International Terrorism, 26 November 2020, Parliamentary Paper 27925, no 756, p 1.

¹⁸ These countries were referred to as the 'framework nations'.

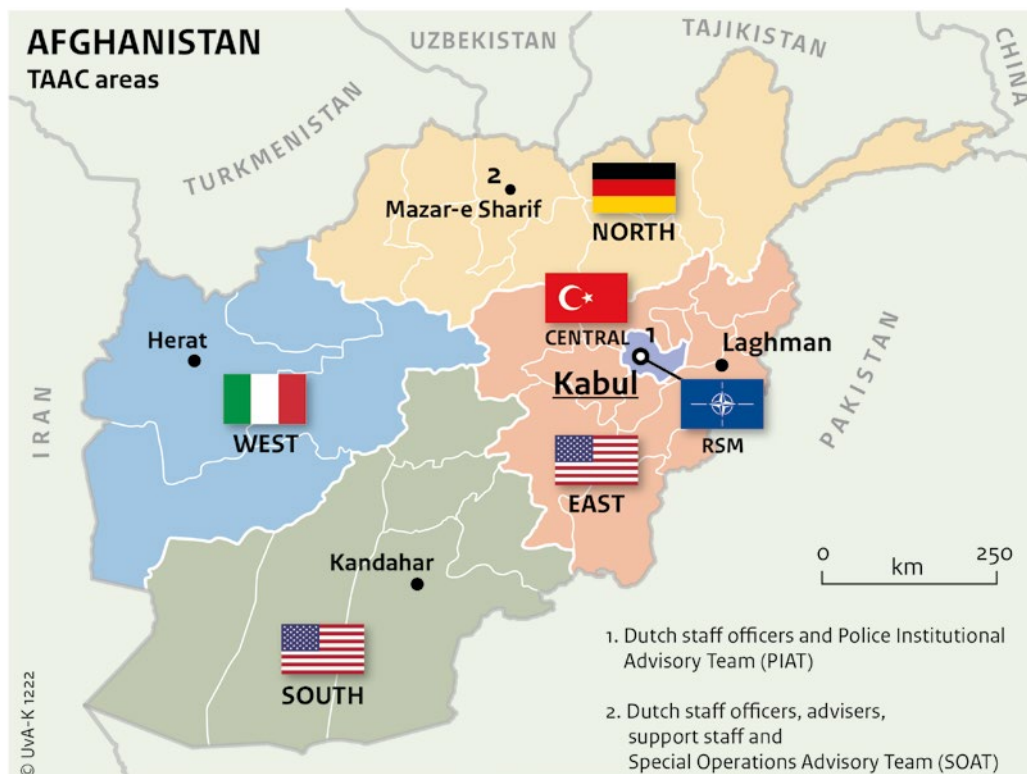


Figure 1: RSM TAA command areas

Areas of focus

To help the ANDSF become independent, NATO identified eight ‘essential functions’ where improvements should be made:¹⁹

1. Multi-year budgeting and execution of programs
2. Transparency, accountability, and oversight
3. The civilian governance structure of Afghan security institutions, and compliance with the rule of law
4. Force Generation (recruiting, training, and equipping troops)
5. Force sustainment (supply and maintenance)
6. Strategy and policy planning, resourcing, and execution
7. Intelligence
8. Strategic communications^{xxxiv}

Figure 2 shows a simplified representation of the ‘theory of change’ of RSM: the rationale for how inputs and activities would lead to the achievement of the objectives that had been set.²⁰ Chapter 4 analyses in more detail the feasibility of this theory of change.

¹⁹ These essential functions had been developed earlier, during the ISAF mandate.

²⁰ This is not the ‘official’ theory of change of RSM. In our research, we did not find a theory of change drafted by NATO, and created one based on our research. This figure shows the theory of change prior to the mission, in 2014. During the mission, troop numbers fluctuated, and parts of the focus of the mission changed (see ‘Extension and expansion of RSM’).



Figure 2: RSM theory of change (at the start of the mission)

Operation Freedom’s Sentinel

From the US perspective, RSM was part of a larger US military deployment in Afghanistan: Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS).²¹ OFS comprised two components. The first was a purely US contribution on counterterrorism against Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), among others. The second was a contribution to RSM.^{xxxv}

It is difficult to determine how many troops the US provided for the counterterrorism component of OFS. From 2015 to 2017, it had anywhere from 8,300 to 10,600 troops in Afghanistan. Setting these numbers against NATO information on RSM troop numbers would give about 1,500 to 3,000 US troops for the counterterrorism component of OFS, and 6,800 to 7,000 troops for the US contribution to RSM.^{xxxvi} The US has not published exact numbers on the number of US troops active in counterterrorism in Afghanistan for most of the period from 2018 to 2021.^{xxxvii}

The mandate for the counterterrorism component of OFS and that for RSM were separate, and NATO allies had limited visibility of OFS’s counterterrorism activities.^{xxxviii} That said, RSM was managed over the years by four successive US generals, each of whom was also the commander of the counterterrorism activities pursued in accordance with OFS.^{xxxix} In addition, NATO allies depended on US enablers²² deployed by the US for both RSM and the counterterrorism component of OFS.^{xl}

Contractors

Besides the military and police personnel deployed for RSM and OFS, a large number of contractors²³ were active in Afghanistan. The number of contractors paid by the US Department of Defence alone was between 23,000 and 40,000 at any given time during the period from 2015 to early 2020.^{xli} The contractors performed a wide range of tasks in logistics, supply, communications, and security.^{xlii} Some contractors trained and advised components of the ANDSF.²⁴ ^{xliii}

RSM advisers dealt with contractors, among other things because of the logistical support they provided. In some cases, RSM advisers worked in teams that included contractors also working as advisers to the ANDSF.^{xliv}

²¹ OFS was the successor to OEF, the US mission that had come to an end on 31 December 2014.

²² Military and other capabilities required to support the mission. This may include transport assets such as helicopters, aircraft, or armoured vehicles, as well as force protection, air support, and intelligence.

²³ In the context of military missions, ‘contractors’ refers to companies or individuals providing goods or services to an army, in this case mainly the US and Afghan armies and NATO. Contractors were also widely active during the ISAF mission. When regular troops were scaled down at the end of ISAF, the number of contractors declined at a slower rate, resulting in a relatively high number of contractors compared to the number of regular international troops during RSM.

²⁴ The US company DynCorp trained and advised officials of the Afghan police and the Afghan interior and defence ministries, for example. US company Raytheon provided training to special units of the Afghan police and army.

Extension and expansion of RSM

Because the desired results were not achieved (see section 3.3), RSM was extended beyond 2016. NATO went from a *time-based* to a *conditions-based* approach. This meant that the guiding factor, when it came to ending the mission, would not be a fixed end date but whether the ANDSF were ready to provide security independently.^{xlv} At NATO meetings in the period from 2017 to 2020, the alliance repeatedly expressed the importance of continuing RSM. The previously intended transition to phase 2 was postponed several times because conditions did not allow it, according to NATO,^{xlvi} and ultimately phase 2 was never reached.

In early 2017, a new four-year plan to professionalise the ANDSF was drawn up by the Afghan government in cooperation with NATO. This *ANDSF Roadmap* focused in particular on building up the capacity of the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF). The aim was to extend the Afghan government's control over more territory and a larger part of the population, in order to force the Taliban to the negotiating table.^{xlvii} As a result, the focus of RSM was broadened to include a greater focus on building up the capacity of the ASSF and the AAF.

The Doha Agreement and the scaling back of RSM

Between 2018 and 2020, during Donald Trump's presidency, the US negotiated bilaterally with the Taliban.^{xlviii} The negotiations led to the signing of the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, also known as the Doha Agreement, on 29 February 2020. A key point of the Doha Agreement was that, on 1 May 2021, all foreign troops would leave Afghanistan, provided the Taliban met a number of conditions. The Taliban would have to prevent individuals or groups from using Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US and its allies. In addition, the Taliban was to start intra-Afghan peace talks.^{xlix} The deadline for withdrawal meant a shift back from a conditions-based to a time-based approach.

During the Doha talks, NATO began planning what was called 'phase A-light'.^l Phase A-light went into effect after the signing of the Doha agreement, and meant that while the mission was still officially in its first phase, the number of military personnel deployed was nevertheless scaled back ahead of the 1 May 2021 deadline for overall withdrawal.²⁵ In January 2021, for instance, there were only 2,500 US military personnel left in Afghanistan, the lowest number since 2001.²⁶

At the same time, in the first months of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to have its effects on the mission. The pandemic meant that TAA had to come to a standstill or to be rendered online, which often did not work well in practice.^{li} NATO declared a large number of advisor positions 'Mission Non Essential' (MNE) during that period, and a large number of advisers were sent home.^{lii}

The end of RSM

Unilateral US decision leads to the end of RSM

In November 2020, Joe Biden won the US presidential election. For a while, NATO allies were unclear about his Afghanistan policy.^{liii} Would he insist on withdrawing by May 1, 2021, or decide to extend the US presence? On 14 April 2021, Biden announced that the US would withdraw its troops no later than 11 September 2021, exactly 20 years after the terrorist attacks in the US.

President Biden's decision meant that RSM would come to a definite end and the general withdrawal of NATO troops was initiated. A large number of NATO allies were not happy with the unilateral US decision, but continuing the mission without US enablers was practically impossible. The general withdrawal of NATO troops was therefore initiated immediately after Biden's decision. This meant that many contractors also had to stop their activities.^{liv} Financial support from the international community to the ANDSF did continue.^{lv}

²⁵ Phase A-light had not been foreseen in the mission plan, but was conceived during the mission. (Internal document from the Dutch Ministry of Defence).

²⁶ It is not clear from the statements given by the US government how many of these 2,500 US troops were deployed for RSM and how many for the counterterrorism component of OFS. Clayton, T. (2021), 'U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions', Congressional Research Service, p.7; Ali, I. (2021), 'U.S. troops in Afghanistan now down to 2,500, lowest since 2001: Pentagon' (www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-military-idUSKBN29K229).

The Taliban take power

The Taliban had gradually gained ground in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021 (see section 3.3). As US and NATO troops left in spring 2021, the Taliban were gaining ground at an ever-more-rapid pace. The resistance the ANDSF offered to the Taliban was fierce in some parts of the country, but limited in others.^{lvi} In some areas, the Taliban were able to take power without fighting by making deals with local leaders. More and more districts fell into Taliban hands, and later the same happened to provincial capitals. The government in Kabul refused, despite repeated advice from US security advisers, to regroup the ANDSF in a smaller number of more-defensible strategic positions. This made them an easier target for Taliban attacks.^{lvii} In addition, the withdrawal of international troops meant that there was no longer any US air support or key logistical support for the ANDSF. This was not only a practical problem—it also further demoralised the ANDSF troops (see Chapters 3 and 4).^{lviii}

The Taliban effectively exploited the weaknesses of the ANDSF by attacking in many places at once.^{lix} Wherever the ANDSF offered resistance, the Taliban dug in. Wherever there was less resistance, they advanced. The ANDSF were overwhelmed by the many different places they had to defend and supply. Existing problems the ANDSF had with logistics, supplies, air support, and command and control worsened. The Taliban then tried to persuade demoralised units of the ANDSF to lay down their arms in exchange for amnesty. In addition, the Taliban launched a campaign in which images were shared on social media of ANDSF units surrendering. The image conveyed by the Taliban was that a Taliban victory was inevitable.^{lx} On 15 August, the Taliban took power from the government in Kabul without resistance from the ANDSF.^{lxi}

NATO allies were taken by surprise by how fast the Taliban's advance was.^{lxii} During the last two weeks of August, and in chaotic conditions, they evacuated compatriots and Afghans with whom they had worked.^{lxiii} Financial support to the ANDSF was stopped, and international reserves of the central bank of Afghanistan were frozen.^{lxiv} The last US military personnel left Kabul on 30 August 2021.^{lxv}

2.2 The Dutch contribution to RSM

Background: Dutch military contributions in Afghanistan prior to RSM

Before RSM started, the Netherlands had contributed to various missions in Afghanistan. It contributed to the US counterterrorism mission OEF, starting in early 2002.²⁷ It also contributed to ISAF, and, from February to August 2003, it led ISAF, together with Germany.^{lxvi} From 2004 to 2006, it provided troops for the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)²⁸ in Baghlan province.^{lxvii} In 2005 and 2006, it also provided special forces units for the OEF mission in Kandahar province.^{lxviii}

The Dutch contribution peaked, in terms of troop numbers, with an ISAF contribution in the southern province of Uruzgan from 2006 to 2010. The Netherlands sent about 1,400 military personnel, and followed a so-called 3D approach, in which defence, diplomacy, and development activities were to reinforce each other.^{lxix} On two occasions, the Netherlands commanded ISAF troops in Regional Command South.²⁹ Political support for this mission waned over time, and in early 2010 the Balkenende IV government fell over the question of whether the mission should be extended for a second time.^{lxx}

²⁷ This initially involved the deployment of the Royal Netherlands Navy and the Royal Netherlands Air Force. On 9 November 2001, the Cabinet informed the House that the US had requested the Netherlands to make military personnel available in the fight against terrorism (see Parliamentary Paper 27925 no 24). For more information on the units the Netherlands eventually made available for Operation Enduring Freedom, see Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 135.

²⁸ The PRTs in Afghanistan consisted of soldiers and civilians from NATO allies whose aim was to contribute to security and reconstruction. There were differences between NATO allies in how they went about this. For more information on PRTs in Afghanistan, see the Institute for the Study of War, 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)' (www.understandingwar.org/provincial-reconstruction-teams-prts).

²⁹ From 1 November 2006 to 1 May 2007, and from 1 November 2008 to 1 November 2009. See Ministry of Defence (2011), *Nederlands aandeel in International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)* (www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/historische-missies/missie-overzicht/2002/international-security-assistance-force-isaf/nederlands-aandeel).

After the fall of the Balkenende IV government, another mission was designed, for which there was support in the House of Representatives: an 'integrated police training mission' in Kunduz province from 2011 to 2013. This mission consisted of both a contribution to ISAF and to the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL), as well as a rule-of-law programme. Dutch military personnel and police officers were stationed at a German-led base in the northern province of Kunduz. In July 2013, the police training mission came to an end.³⁰

Genesis of the Dutch contribution to RSM

In the first half of 2014, Germany had already committed to RSM as a *framework nation* that would take the lead in the northern region. That spring, Germany indicated that it wanted to cooperate with the Netherlands, and indicated what it needed in terms of support, such as advisers, mobile force-protection units, medical-support officers, logistics company officers and staff officers.³¹ On 9 July 2014, a NATO Force Generation conference was held for RSM, at which member states gave an indication of the contribution they would be making to the mission.

According to stakeholders who were interviewed, contributing to RSM was taken for granted both by the Cabinet and Senior Civil Servants, and the option of not participating was never given any serious consideration.^{lxxi} There were a number of reasons for this. The government considered it important to show allied solidarity with NATO, the US, and Germany (see section 3.4). The Netherlands had been militarily active in Afghanistan since 2002, and compared to previous missions, the contribution to RSM was seen as relatively safe, limited in scope, and entailing little political risk. It was also seen as a good opportunity to cooperate with Germany.^{lxxii} The Netherlands had been cooperating militarily with Germany for some time, amongst others in the German-Dutch Army Corps and during the Integrated Police-Training Mission in the Afghan province of Kunduz. With a Dutch contribution to RSM in northern Afghanistan, there could be a further operationalisation of military cooperation with Germany.^{lxxiii}

The Cabinet informed the House of Representatives on 23 June 2014 of its intention to contribute to RSM,^{lxxiv} and on 1 September 2014 about its decision to contribute.^{lxxv} On 20 November 2014, a large majority of the House of Representatives approved the Dutch participation in the mission. There was considerably less debate about participation in RSM than there had been regarding previous Dutch contributions in the Afghan provinces of Uruzgan and Kunduz.³²

How the Dutch contribution to RSM was structured

The start of the Dutch contribution to RSM coincided with the start of the overall mission on 1 January 2015. It was initially announced that the Dutch contribution would last until the end of 2016. A maximum of 100 military personnel would be deployed at a time, and the Netherlands would provide just under one percent of the total number of NATO military personnel that were deployed. Just as in the case of the overall mission, about 10 percent of the military personnel deployed by the Netherlands would be advisers, while the rest would be holding positions supporting the advisers (see box 1).

³⁰ The training of Afghan police officers in Kunduz was terminated at that time, but the rule-of-law programme continued with Dutch financial support. For more information and an evaluation of this mission contribution, see: IOB (2020), 'Op zoek naar draagvlak: de geïntegreerde politietrainingsmissie in Kunduz, Afghanistan'. *Postmissiebeoordeling* (www.iob-evaluatie.nl/publicaties/rapporten/2019/11/19/432-kunduz).

³¹ Germany also expressed a need for helicopters for close air support and medical evacuation, but due to other commitments, the Netherlands could not meet this need. (Internal document from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

³² In a parliamentary debate on 20 November 2014, the then-ruling parties, the VVD and the PvdA, agreed to the Cabinet's decision, as did the opposition parties D66, CDA, ChristenUnie, SGP, and GroenLinks. The SP, the PVV and the group Bontes/Van Klaveren opposed the mission. See House of Representatives Plenary Report, 27th Session, 20 November 2014.

Box 1: The Dutch contribution to RSM that was announced before the mission started

- About 10 people to advise the ANDSF;
- About 15 staff officers at NATO headquarters in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif;
- About 75 support staff:
 - About 25 people providing medical services for the NATO contingent in Mazar-e Sharif;
 - A transport unit of about 30 people, including security for the advisers;
 - About 20 people supporting the multinational logistics unit and the national support detachment.^{lxxvi}

Military personnel were usually deployed for a period of four to six months, depending on the position. Colleagues would then take over their duties. The total number of Dutch soldiers deployed to the mission over the years was thus much higher than 100: over 2,300.^{lxxvii} As usual in military missions, the number of soldiers deployed at any one time was also not exactly one hundred. There were all kinds of practical reasons for this, such as the fact that certain planned positions were temporarily unfilled, or that soldiers left for the mission area, or departed from it, earlier or later than planned.

Most of the soldiers deployed were stationed at the German-led *Train Advise Assist Command – North* (TAAC-N) at Camp Marmal in Mazar-e Sharif, the capital of Balkh province.³³ In addition, a number of military personnel were stationed at various locations in Kabul, including NATO headquarters and the international airport (see Figure 3).^{lxxviii}



Figure 3: Locations of Dutch personnel deployed in TAAC-N

The Dutch military personnel who were deployed fell under NATO's command structure, and were dispersed across various multinational teams of NATO military personnel. At the same time, there was a Dutch Senior National Representative (SNR), the highest Dutch military representative within the deployment area. He was the representative of the Commander of the Armed Forces in the deployment area and the Dutch point of contact for military representatives of other countries and for Dutch military personnel within RSM. In addition, the SNR acted as *Red Card Holder*, ensuring that tasks assigned to Dutch personnel fit within the Dutch mandate.^{lxxix}

³³ TAAC-N covered nine northern provinces altogether. Besides Balkh, these were Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Samangan, Sar-e-pul, and Takhar.

The Cabinet stated that the contribution to Resolute Support was not a Dutch ‘integrated’ mission, with an integrated civil-military command and integrated mission design.^{lxxx} It did state, however, that the mission contribution was part of the broader Dutch deployment in Afghanistan, where political, development cooperation and defence efforts should complement each other as much as possible. For example, the Netherlands also contributed financially to several development cooperation programmes in Afghanistan while it was also contributing to RSM. The broader Dutch deployment in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2021, and the coherence between the various efforts, are the subject of a forthcoming IOB evaluation.^{lxxxi}

Advisers

The Dutch advisers, like all other Dutch soldiers deployed, were under NATO command. They were placed in multinational teams advising Afghan counterparts (from the armed forces and the police) on specific topics such as intelligence, logistics, operations, project management, education and training, personnel, information technology (IT), external communications, and gender.^{lxxxii} The Dutch advisers mostly provided advice to officials of the Afghan police and, to a lesser extent, to the Afghan armed forces.^{lxxxiii} That being said, like the armed forces, the Afghan police were often deployed in battles against the Taliban and in that sense also had a military role.^{lxxxiv}

There was a mandate for 10 Dutch advisers, but in practice it was often the case that fewer than 10 people were dispatched as advisers during the mission.^{lxxxv} On the other hand, there were staff officers who also had an advisory role in addition to their work on the mission’s military staff. There were also staff officers who decided to take on advisory duties themselves during the mission, or who sometimes accompanied advisers during their TAA work.^{lxxxvi}

The Dutch advisers visited their Afghan counterparts at a number of different locations in and near Mazar-e Sharif, for example at police stations and at Camp Shaheen, where the 209th Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA) was stationed. Later, they also gave advice at Camp Pamir in Kunduz province.^{lxxxvii} Helicopters were used for the trips from Mazar-e Sharif to Kunduz, because of the security situation.³⁴ ^{lxxxviii} Transport to counterparts in the Afghan police in Balkh was mostly by road, although this too was regularly difficult because of the lack of security and of available force protection for the advisers.^{lxxxix} Dutch advisers generally did not visit Afghan counterparts in the seven other provinces that were part of the area covered by TAAC-N, aside from Balkh and Kunduz.³⁵ ^{xc}

Force-protection units, medical- and logistics-support officers, and staff officers

A large part of the Dutch contribution consisted of different categories of support staff. First, the Netherlands made a contribution to the transport and security of the advisory teams, by providing force protection. Dutch force-protection platoons were part of a ‘Multi National Force Protection Company’ that ensured the safety of advisers from all contributing countries at TAAC-N, both at the TAA sites and en route to and from them. The commander of this multinational force protection company was also Dutch.^{xc}

Secondly, the Netherlands provided general and specialist medical capacity to TAAC-N.³⁶ People were deployed to support the field hospital at TAAC-N and for the Mobile Medical Teams and Mobile Emergency Physician Teams. These teams provided medical support while advisers were travelling, and at TAA sites. During the mission, there were a number of occasions when Dutch medical units were deployed in the field, for example during a Taliban attack on Afghan Camp Shaheen and later during an insider attack³⁷ at the same camp.^{xcii}

³⁴ For travel between Camp Marmal and Camp Shaheen near Mazar-e Sharif, it was also mainly helicopters that were used.

³⁵ Occasionally, a Dutch soldier would go to a province other than Kunduz or Balkh, but this was incidental. Dutch military personnel who were serving as force protection for NATO advisers from other countries would go more often to provinces other than Balkh and Kunduz. In 2019, for example, there was a Dutch unit at Camp Maimanah in Faryab province.

³⁶ Includes a small number of individuals from the Institute of Defence Relations Hospitals (internal documents Ministry of Defence).

³⁷ Insider attacks are those launched by ANDSF members or people pretending to be ANDSF members.

Thirdly, the Netherlands provided about 20 personnel to support the multinational logistics unit at TAAC-N and the Dutch national support element (NSE). The multinational logistics unit provided much of the logistics support at TAAC-N, as well as the operations of the airfield at Mazer-e Sharif. This meant that the contributing countries did not have to each deploy a large number of their own military personnel to provide logistical support to their contingents. Nevertheless, there were also logistical tasks that remained the responsibility of each country. These tasks were performed by the NSE.^{xciii}

In addition, the Netherlands was represented in the mission's chain of command by a number of staff officers that it provided to both RSM headquarters in Kabul and to TAAC-N. This allowed the Netherlands to exert influence within the higher command lines. As described above, some of the deployed staff officers in TAAC-N also provided the ANDSF with TAA on their area of expertise. For example, Dutch staff members offered advice on planning, and helped improve the medical-delivery chain within the ANDSF.^{xciv}

Extension and expansion of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support

In the first year of RSM, the Taliban gained ground, just as they had in previous years, in northern Afghanistan, where most of the Dutch personnel were stationed.^{xcv} In late September 2015, the Taliban even captured the city of Kunduz, with relatively little resistance from the Afghan army and police. Only with help from the US air force and US and Afghan special forces did the Afghan government regain control of the city after two weeks.^{xcvi} For the Netherlands and other NATO allies, this was an important signal that the ANDSF were not yet capable of independently maintaining security in Afghanistan.³⁸

Because of ongoing problems within the ANDSF, the Dutch contribution to RSM was extended on three occasions: twice by one year, until the end of 2017 and the end of 2018 respectively, and then by three years, until the end of 2021.³⁹ The third extension entailed an increase in the mandate for the Dutch contribution to RSM, from 100 to 160 military personnel. This increase in the Dutch contribution was in line with the overall increase in the number of troops in the mission as a whole. The Dutch contribution thus remained at just under one percent of the total number of NATO military personnel who were deployed to the mission.^{xcvii}

Special Operations Advisory Team

As described in section 2.1, the 2017 ANDSF Roadmap and the expanded mandate of RSM that resulted from it provided for the further build-up of the AAF and the ASSF. At the request of the US, NATO, and Afghanistan, the Netherlands contributed to this with up to 60 military personnel at a time, in addition to the already-existing mission contribution of up to 100 soldiers.^{xcviii} Together with German special units, Dutch Special Operations Forces (SOF), consisting of soldiers from the Korps Commandotroepen (Commando Corps) and the Korps Mariniers (Marine Corps), made up the Special Operations Advisory Team (SOAT) in Mazar-e Sharif.⁴⁰ The SOAT was deployed to train a new Afghan special police unit called the Afghan Territorial Force (ATF) 888.⁴¹ ^{xcix} It was envisaged in 2018 that ATF-888 would consist of about 465 personnel in total.^c Its task would be to carry out high-risk arrests, to respond to crises, and to carry out hostage-rescue operations in northern Afghanistan in particular. The objective of the SOAT was that ATF-888 would eventually be able to prepare, conduct, and support operations completely independently and effectively, and on the basis of evidence and/or a court order.^{ci} This would also require

³⁸ The Dutch Minister of Defence wrote the following after a meeting of NATO defence ministers on 8 October 2015: 'Ministers agreed that it is worrisome that the Taliban were able to take Kunduz temporarily. It is clear that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces still need support. Many Ministers felt that the transition to phase 2 of the Resolute Support mission can begin only when conditions permit' (Parliamentary Paper 28676, no 231, p. 3).

³⁹ On 30 September 2016, an extension of one year was announced, until the end of 2017 (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 601, p. 2). On 11 September 2017, an extension of one year was announced, until 31 December 2018 (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 611, p. 1). On 15 June 2018, an extension of three years was announced, until 31 December 2021 (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 630, p. 1). During the mission, a number of motions were submitted by opposition parties to withdraw Dutch military personnel participating in RSM, but none commanded a majority.

⁴⁰ The SOAT gave the training courses to ATF-888 among others at Camp Eagle, which was adjacent to Camp Marmal in Mazar-e Sharif.

⁴¹ The unit fell under the Afghan Interior Ministry's *General Command of Police Special Units* (GCPSU).

ATF-888 to be able to sustain itself in the long run, for example in terms of personnel and equipment.⁴² The SOAT's training of ATF-888 started in September 2018.^{cii} Whereas until then Dutch advisers had been primarily focused on advising individual senior ANDSF officers, the SOAT trained an entire unit, including the lower cadres. Members of the SOAT also accompanied ATF-888 during operations. The SOAT guidance was therefore dubbed, not TAA, but TAA+A: Train, Advise, Assist, and Accompany.

Police Institutional Advisory Team

In addition to the special units for the SOAT, the Cabinet also announced in 2018 that it had offered six additional police advisers to NATO for the Police Institutional Advisory Team (PIAT) in Kabul.^{ciii} Until then, the Netherlands advised police officers only in northern Afghanistan. With this new contribution to the PIAT, the Cabinet also aimed to contribute to capacity-building for the Afghan Ministry of Interior in Kabul, which the Afghan police came under.^{civ}

The Dutch police advisers in the PIAT started their work in January 2019.^{cv} The Dutch nationals who were deployed were two advisers from the Royal Military Police (*Koninklijke Marechaussee, KMar*) and four advisers from the National Police. Because people from the National Police were deployed, the Ministry of Justice and Security became involved in the Dutch contribution to RSM from then on.

The Dutch advisers within the PIAT became part of multinational teams, just as other advisers did. They were based in different locations in Kabul. Among other things, the Dutch advisers gave advice to Afghan senior policymakers and to the leadership of police training and recruitment centres.^{cv} In July 2019, one of the positions held by the Netherlands within PIAT expired, and from January 2020, the Netherlands held only four advisory positions.^{cvi} In March 2020, the police functions within PIAT were classified as 'non-mission-essential'.⁴³

The scaling back of the Dutch contribution to RSM

Starting in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hampered the mission. NATO allies therefore temporarily withdrew some of those they had deployed. The Netherlands withdrew about 35 Dutch military personnel from the mission area.^{cvi} These included the Dutch gender advisers at TAAC-N, special units of SOAT, and some of the advisers within the PIAT.^{cix} When it became clear that the pandemic was going to continue, it was decided not to send these advisers to Afghanistan anymore.^{cx}

Besides COVID-19, the Doha Agreement of 29 February 2020 also brought further troop reductions. In May 2020, the Cabinet reported that about 15 military personnel would be withdrawn.^{cx}

⁴² Prior to the Dutch contribution to the SOAT, the Ministry of Defence identified 5 phases for achieving the goal of a fully autonomous ATF-888. 1: Preparation of the training by the SOAT. 2: Between September 2018 and March 2020, ATF-888 should grow from one to four squadrons, and a support squadron and a cadre of staff should then be added. 3: The unit as a whole should be developed, thus entailing improvements in the quality of ATF-888's staff. 4: Progress should be sustained, so that ATF-888 would be able to sustain itself over the long term, among other things in terms of personnel and equipment. 5: The presence of the SOAT would be wound down, and the SOAT would eventually leave the mission area. These phases were communicated to the House of Representatives in a technical briefing prior to the 5 July 2018 General Consultation on the Dutch deployment in Afghanistan (internal documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

⁴³ The Parliamentary Letter dated 19 May 2021 states that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PIAT was deemed non-mission-essential in March 2020, but that one Dutch advisor could continue some of the PIAT's work (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no 784, p. 7). However, KMar employees who had been deployed said that only the positions filled by the police within the PIAT were classified as non-mission-essential, and that the positions in the PIAT filled by the KMar were kept. They said that the PIAT ceased to exist in October 2020, but that its duties continued within the Ministerial Advisory Group–Interior, which gave advice to the ANP's strategic headquarters and the interior ministry. The KMar advisers remained active within RSM up until spring 2021.

The end of the Dutch contribution to RSM

As the 1 May 2021 deadline from the Doha agreement approached, the Netherlands continued to push for a conditions-based approach to RSM, and for a joint NATO decision on a possible withdrawal or extension of the mission.^{cxii} The Dutch Cabinet attached great importance to reaching a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, rather than just the Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban.^{cxiii} Dutch stakeholders, like many other allies,^{cxiv} were therefore critical of President Biden's unilateral decision in April 2021 to start withdrawing all US troops^{cxv} – and thereby to end RSM.

During the withdrawal of Dutch soldiers, up to eighty Dutch soldiers were temporarily added to the mission to carry out security-related tasks.^{cxvi} In addition, nine additional military specialists were temporarily deployed for the withdrawal of Dutch troops.^{cxvii}

The transport of the eighty soldiers to Afghanistan caused discontent among parties in the House of Representatives, as the soldiers were already on their way before a committee debate on their deployment had taken place. The defence minister later promised, in the committee debate on the deployment, that the incident would be included in this evaluation of the Dutch contribution to RSM, including looking at ways to prevent similar situations in the future.^{cxviii} On this topic, see box 2.

Box 2: *The situation in which committee debate took place after the departure of military personnel*

The situation

- At the request of the German commander of TAAC-N, the Netherlands sent up to 80 additional soldiers, as force protection, to Mazar-e Sharif on 21 April 2021, to help secure TAAC-N against possible Taliban attacks. The debate on sending the military took place on 22 April, after the soldiers had already left for Afghanistan. Although the House did not formally have to give its consent to this deployment, Article 100 of the Constitution requires the States General to be informed in advance about the deployment of the armed forces, except when compelling reasons make this impossible.⁴⁴

Why the parliamentary debate did not take place before the military left

- Internal documents from the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs,^{cxix} as well as interviews,^{cxx} show that months before 21 April, Civil Service officials were considering the possible deployment and trying to ensure that a decision to send additional military personnel would be conveyed to the House of Representatives in a timely manner. They specifically tried to prevent that the House of Representatives would be faced with a *fait accompli*. There are several reasons why the parliamentary debate did not, in the end, take place before the military left:

⁴⁴ Article 100(2) reads as follows: 'The provisions of paragraph 1 shall not apply if compelling reasons exist to prevent the provision of information in advance. In this event, information shall be supplied as soon as possible.'

Tight planning because of uncertainty about whether force protection would actually be needed

- The ministries and the House of Representatives knew that there was a possibility that there would be a need to send additional force protection to Afghanistan, but for a while it was uncertain whether the request would actually materialise and, if so, when exactly. The agreed deadline of 1 May 2021 for the US withdrawal from the Doha agreement was approaching, but it was not clear whether President Biden would stick to it. The extra security personnel would be needed because the Taliban had warned that it would introduce 'countermeasures' if the US did not comply with the deadline.^{cxix} The House was informed about this on 4 February 2021.^{cxxii}
- On 13 April 2021, it became clear that President Biden would announce the general withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan a day later. The withdrawal would be completed by September 11 instead of the 1 May deadline that had been agreed with the Taliban.^{cxxiii} Subsequently, on 13 April, the Netherlands received a formal request from the German commander of TAAC-N to send the additional force protection to Afghanistan and have it operational by 30 April at the latest. The House of Representatives was informed about this request on the same day.^{cxxiv}
- Following the formal German request, the Cabinet informed the House on 16 April, through an Article-100 letter, that it had decided to send the additional force protection to Afghanistan.^{cxxv} A debate was scheduled for 22 April. Later that day, a German flight would leave with which the soldiers could go to Mazar-e Sharif. However, on 21 April, it became clear that the intended 22 April flight was no longer leaving because Germany had not received overflight clearance from Turkmenistan.^{cxxvi} To fly via another route on the same day was not an option, as obtaining the overflight permit(s) for that would take at least several days, and possibly longer.⁴⁵

The time required for military deployability in the mission area

- When military personnel are deployed, they routinely need several days of preparation time in the area of the deployment before they are actually operationally ready. Seven days were allotted for the force protection that was being deployed. Therefore, in order to have troops operationally ready by 30 April, in line with the German request, force protection would have to be in Afghanistan by 24 April at the latest. This meant that an alternative flight had to be arranged within a few days.
- The 22 April parliamentary debate could not be brought forward. This made finding a flight even more difficult, as the military would thus ideally leave after the 22 April debate and be in the mission area by 24 April at the latest.

Dependence on allies for air transport

- The Cabinet looked at several options for sending the military to the mission area on a later flight.^{cxxvii} Here, the Netherlands was dependent on allies because it does not have suitable air capacity itself to transport soldiers to Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Even if the Netherlands did have its own suitable aircraft available, it would still have had to obtain a new overflight permit, which would have taken too long. Commercial flights were not an option, partly because they could not land safely in northern Afghanistan. It turned out that the only flight the Dutch military could take to northern Afghanistan before 24 April would also leave before the debate: a US flight on the evening of 21 April.^{cxxviii}

⁴⁵ Moreover, there were few alternative flight routes to Afghanistan. Flying over Iran, for instance, was not an option for security reasons.

⁴⁶ The Netherlands had four C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, but they were not available at that time for deployment to Afghanistan. In addition, the C-130 does not have the range to fly to Afghanistan in a single go, and it is not equipped to carry out such long flights with personnel on board. At the time, the Netherlands did have access to a McDonnell Douglas KDC-10 transport aircraft, but it did not have its own protection equipment, which was needed to transport personnel safely to a dangerous area such as northern Afghanistan.

Conclusion

- In the preparations that were made to deploy the eighty military personnel, the need to inform the House of Representatives in good time had been considered in advance, and there was a wish not to bypass the House of Representatives. However, because of an unfortunate confluence of circumstances, things did not go according to plan. In view of these circumstances, the Cabinet took the view that the safety of the military personnel in the mission area, and the wish to fulfil the commitment to Germany that the military would be deployable by 30 April, were more important than waiting for the debate. We found nothing in our investigation that the government could have done to prevent the situation.
- One way to reduce the likelihood of such an incident occurring again in the future is for the Netherlands to acquire its own strategic air-transport capacity. The Netherlands has already taken steps in this direction.^{cxxxix} It is still possible that a last-minute overflight permit will not be issued, but then there may be more room to independently choose a more favourable time to transport Dutch soldiers to a mission area.
- A second option, for future situations where the timing could turn out to be tight, would be to organise a closed technical briefing or a closed debate at an early stage, so as to be able to give the House of Representatives more-detailed information. For example at the moment the Cabinet pledges to put military personnel on standby for deployment.⁴⁷ A downside of this option is that, at such an early stage, it might be that not all operational details are known, such as the spectrum of violence (and therefore the risk of casualties) in the environment in which the military would be operating. Another disadvantage is that a technical briefing or a debate would be organised even though there is a possibility that the deployment will not go ahead.

The last Dutch soldiers who were part of RSM left Afghanistan on 24 June 2021. As described in section 2.1, the Taliban were accelerating their advance across Afghanistan even as NATO troops were withdrawing. After the Taliban took Kabul on 15 August, the Cabinet expressed surprise, like most NATO allies, at the speed of the advance.^{cxxx} Soon after, the Cabinet sent soldiers from the Commando Corps, the Marine Corps, and the Special Security Commands Brigade (*Brigade Speciale Beveiligingsopdrachten*) to Kabul to help evacuate Dutch nationals, as well as Afghans who had cooperated with the Dutch government. The last staff at the Netherlands embassy and the last military personnel dispatched to accompany the evacuation left Kabul on 26 August 2021, thus ending 20 years of Dutch military presence in Afghanistan.^{cxxxi}

⁴⁷ In the present case, the House of Representatives was informed on 4 February 2021 that Dutch military personnel were on standby—see Parliamentary Paper 28676, no. 353.

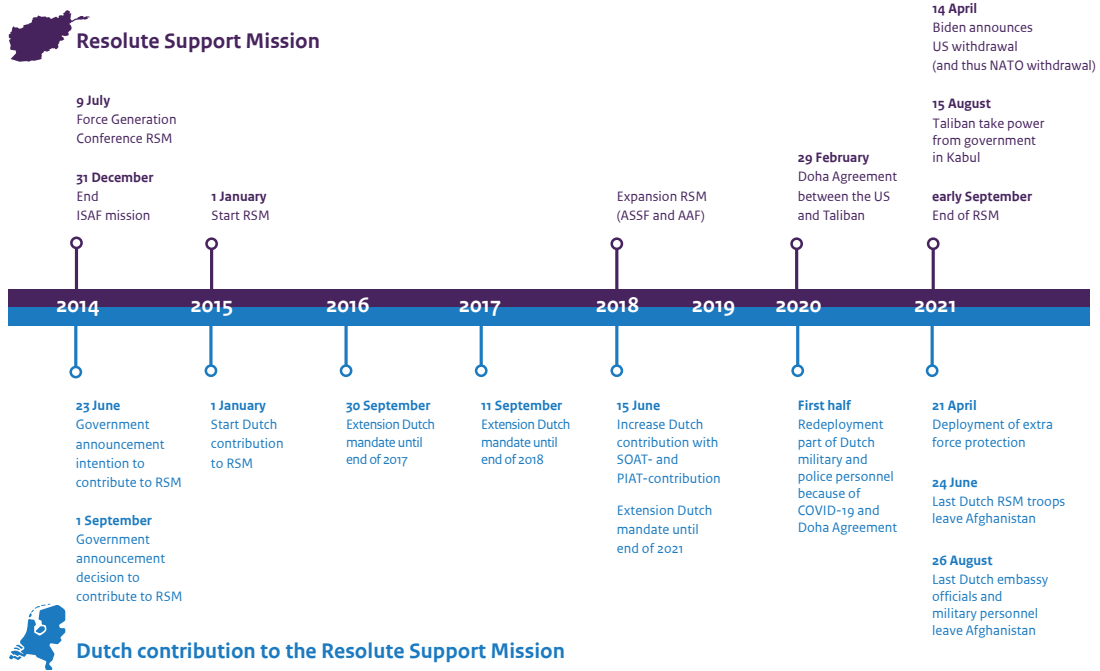


Figure 4: RSM and the Dutch contribution to it: a timeline



3 Realisation of the objectives of RSM and of the Dutch contribution to it

Summary

- The Taliban takeover after the withdrawal of international troops shows that the main objective of RSM was not achieved: to build a self-reliant Afghan security apparatus capable of resisting the Taliban and other insurgents in the long term.
- During the mission, Dutch advisers, like those of other countries, took small steps in helping individual Afghan partners. Most progress in this regard was observed in the training of the Afghan Special Security Forces unit ATF-888 by Dutch and German special units, starting in 2018.

- However, the steps taken by RSM trainers and advisers did not lead to structural progress in the self-reliance of the ANDSF. Throughout the period of the mission, the ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors, and experienced major problems with key functions such as supply, command, and logistics. In addition, the ANDSF continued to suffer from widespread corruption and high turnover, high casualties, and low combat readiness among military and police personnel.
- The mission also failed to ensure that the ANDSF would be better able to resist the Taliban. Throughout the mission, from 2015 to 2021, the Taliban expanded the area they controlled, as well as their influence.
- Given that the Netherlands was unable to contribute to structural improvements in the self-reliance of the ANDSF, it was also unable to structurally contribute to the 'grounds for participation' that had been formulated for the Dutch mission contribution: prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a sanctuary for terrorist organisations; reduce irregular migration; and promote human rights, economic growth and the rule of law in Afghanistan.
- During RSM, there was a lack of consistent and adequate monitoring and reporting on the part of NATO on the development of the various capabilities of the ANDSF. NATO—and the Netherlands—also portrayed the mission's progress too positively in their reporting.

3.1 The objectives of the Dutch contribution to RSM

In this chapter, we discuss the extent to which the objectives of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support were achieved. In announcing that the Netherlands would be participating in the mission, the Cabinet stated that it had not formulated its own objectives for RSM, but was following those set by NATO.^{xxxiii} These objectives were:

- The creation of a professional and self-reliant security apparatus;
- that would be able to maintain security and resist the Taliban and other insurgents, also in the long run.

It is well known that these objectives were not achieved, given the Taliban's rapid seizure of power in August 2021 after the withdrawal of international troops. In this chapter, we therefore answer the question: regardless of the final outcome, to what extent was progress made during the mission towards improving the professionalism and self-reliance of the ANDSF, and thus towards meeting the objectives of the mission?

It is difficult in this regard to distinguish between what Dutch advisers achieved and what RSM as a whole achieved. First, the aim of the Dutch advisers was to contribute to the purpose of RSM as a whole. Second, in many cases, intermediate targets had not been formulated for what Dutch and other advisers were meant to achieve in the TAA sessions with their specific Afghan counterparts—see section 4.2. Third, Dutch advisers worked together in multinational teams with advisers from other countries, so that no separate Dutch component of the mission can be identified.⁴⁸ Much of this chapter is therefore about the extent to which the objectives of the overall RSM were achieved. However, wherever possible, we will discuss the particular experiences of Dutch advisers.

Besides the official objectives of Resolute Support, the Dutch Cabinet mentioned a number of 'grounds for participation' in announcing that the Netherlands would be taking part, such as helping to reduce migration and to promote human rights. In section 3.4, we discuss the grounds for participation and to what extent they were borne out.

⁴⁸ This applied to a lesser extent to the training of ATF-888, which the Netherlands did together with Germany only—but even that cannot be considered solely a Dutch mission component (see section 2.2).

3.2 Situation of the ANDSF and security at the start of RSM

Before looking at how the ANDSF and the security situation evolved during RSM, it is worth establishing what the situation was at the start of the mission in January 2015. The ANDSF struggled with poor logistics and planning, and there were not enough teams for medical evacuations. In addition, there were intelligence problems, and AAF was unable to provide sufficient air support.^{cxviii} There were also problems with leadership, widespread corruption, a high percentage of deserters, and low morale within both the armed forces and the police.^{cxviiii} A specific problem with the Afghan police was that people in the police force were generally more poorly trained and armed than those in the armed forces, but were nevertheless deployed for operations against the Taliban, thus resulting in relatively high casualties.^{cxvix} Finally, the ANDSF were financially almost entirely dependent on the US and other NATO allies.^{cxvii} ISAF classified 74% of the ANDSF as 'capable' or 'fully capable' in a Regional ANSF Status Report (RASR) in October 2014. However, the US independent watchdog (SIGAR)⁴⁹ reported concerns about the reliability of the data on the basis of which these conclusions were drawn. This was because the US and other allies had limited visibility on the actual status of the ANDSF.^{cxvii}

The security situation in which the ANDSF was operating deteriorated in 2014. A key indicator was that the Taliban expanded the area under its control in 2014.^{cxviii} That year, the ANDSF lost between 15,000 and 20,000 personnel through desertions, injuries, and fatalities in the armed struggle against mainly the Taliban.^{cxvix} Also, in 2014, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)⁵⁰ reported the highest number of civilian casualties since numbers had first been recorded in 2009.^{cxl}

3.3 Measuring, and reporting on, the development of the ANDSF during the mission

Limited monitoring of progress

It is difficult to say in any detail how the capabilities of the ANDSF developed during RSM. A key reason for this is that NATO's progress reports during the mission provide limited insights into the development of various aspects of the professionalism and self-reliance of the ANDSF.

Commanders at RSM regional headquarters in the north, east, south and west of Afghanistan reported monthly on ANDSF progress in the Monthly ANDSF Assessment Report (MAAR).⁵¹ ^{cxli} The RSM commander reported monthly on the mission's progress to NATO headquarters in Brussels based on these and other documents. In addition to reporting in the military line, there was reporting by NATO's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan to NATO headquarters in Brussels. NATO countries also reported directly to their own capitals. The US in particular collected a lot of data and other intelligence, and that gave it a better intelligence position than other NATO allies.^{cxlii}

⁴⁹ SIGAR is mandated by the US Congress to provide independent and objective oversight of US reconstruction projects and activities in Afghanistan. Since 2008, SIGAR has been conducting audits and surveys to promote the efficiency and effectiveness of reconstruction programmes and to detect and prevent waste and fraud (see www.sigar.mil/).

⁵⁰ A UN political mission in Afghanistan established in 2002 through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1401. See UNAMA (<https://unama.unmissions.org/about>).

⁵¹ The MAAR was part of the wider assessment of RSM. Each month, RSM advisers had to submit their assessments to the Afghan Assessment Group, which then aggregated them into an overarching ANDSF assessment covering the overall campaign plan. These reports assessed the progress made by the ANDSF across five pillars: leadership, operations, command and control, personnel and training, and supply and maintenance.

The various reports should, in theory, lead to a good understanding of the development of the ANDSF, but in practice they often did not provide a good picture. There are a number of reasons for this. At the start of RSM, the RASR, which had been used up to then, was replaced by the MAAR. The definitions and indicators used to measure progress in the MAAR were different from those that had been used in the RASR, thus making it difficult, based on these reports, to compare the status of the ANDSF prior to RSM to their status during RSM.⁵² In addition, the definitions and indicators used to measure progress within the MAAR changed over time, which makes it difficult, based on this data, to compare progress at different points in time during the period of the mission, from 2015 to 2021.⁵³

At NATO headquarters in Brussels, the reports were used every six months for a so-called Periodic Mission Review. However, these did not go into any detail on the capabilities of the ANDSF. Moreover, in reports, the ANDSF's status was often compared in the new report with the one that preceded it. As a result, improvements and deteriorations were identified by looking back to the most recent reporting period rather than by analysing, over the longer term, the extent to which the ANDSF were moving closer to meeting the overarching key objectives of the mission.^{cxliii}

In addition to limitations that arose from the monitoring framework, there were also problems with the data that ended up in the reports. The various assessments of the ANDSF were for a large part based on quantitative data, such as the number of people in a unit, which did not necessarily reflect the actual professionalism or self-reliance of the ANDSF. Qualitative indicators, such as troop morale, the will to fight, and cohesion within units, were given scant mention, if any, in the progress reports.^{cxliv} In addition, RSM officers often depended on Afghan counterparts for data,⁵⁴ and that made the data unreliable. One example is the large number of 'ghost soldiers' and 'ghost police' that ended up in official statistics.⁵⁵

⁵² In the RASR, different elements in the ANDSF were assessed and grouped into seven categories: 1) fully capable, 2) capable, 3) partially capable, 4) developing, 5) established, 6) not assessed, 7) awaiting fielding. In the MAAR, the number of categories was reduced to five: 1) sustainable, 2) fully capable, 3) capable, 4) partially capable, 5) in development. For an overview, see SIGAR (2022), 'Interim Report: Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, pp. 29–31.

⁵³ The essential functions were replaced by nine Advising Functional Areas, as they were called, in early 2018. Gender was added separately to these. (US Department of Defense, 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: June 2016 Report to Congress', pp. 22–23; Afghan War News, 'Advising Functional Areas' (<https://afghanwarnews.info/sfa/advising-functional-areas.html>)).

⁵⁴ The Afghan police, for instance, on which most of the Dutch advisers were focused, operated in areas the advisers hardly ever visited, so the advisers had little insight into their performance or how they were progressing—see also section 4.2. SIGAR (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, pp. 120–123; Friesendorf, C., en Krempel, J. (2011), 'Militarized versus Civilian Policing: Problems of Reforming the Afghan National Police', Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, pp. 21–28.

⁵⁵ Ghost soldiers and police are soldiers and police officers who exist only a payroll but not in reality. Salaries were diverted or withheld by officers or other government officials. In 2016, SIGAR wrote that neither the US nor the Afghan government knew how many Afghan soldiers and police officers actually existed, how many were ready to be deployed and to what extent they were operationally ready. In 2019, SIGAR wrote that the introduction of a new registration method revealed that there were 10,000 fewer soldiers and 25,000 fewer police officers than had been reported a quarter earlier.⁵⁵ SIGAR (2016), 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2016', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 8; SIGAR (2019), 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 July 2019', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 64.

All of this meant that there was a lack of detailed NATO reports on the development of the ANDSF's various capabilities.^{cxiv} This also applied to reporting to the Netherlands on the part of Dutch officials who were on deployment. Although the majority of reports from the mission area went to NATO headquarters, the Dutch SNR also reported directly to the Ministry of Defence. These reports at most painted a general picture of the development of the ANDSF. At several points, for instance, the reports say that progress of the development of the ANDSF is slow, but that “step-by-step improvements can be seen”, or that there are sufficient signs that the ANDSF “has the potential to grow further”.^{cxvi} However, these conclusions are neither specific nor substantiated by any indicators. Other SNR reports to the Ministry of Defence explicitly state that it is difficult to say anything about the effectiveness of the TAA on the ANDSF because it is not measured.^{cxvii}

Overly positive reporting on the development of the ANDSF

In addition to the lack of detailed monitoring of the progress made by the ANDSF, interview respondents,^{cxlviii} internal documents,^{cxlix} and publicly available literature^{cl} indicated that NATO reports were giving too positive a picture of the mission's progress. Reports from the field to NATO headquarters were generally too optimistic about ANDSF capabilities and about the overall security situation. Several interview respondents who had been on deployment for the mission or who had worked within NATO mentioned, for example, that a 'traffic light system' had been used to assess ANDSF self-sufficiency and the security situation, and gave examples of how items were set to 'green' that were not very positive at all.^{cli} Negative points were then regularly further downplayed as reporting moved up the NATO hierarchy and when consensus had to be reached within the organisation on reporting to partner countries and the outside world.

Causes

Several reasons for this trend are cited in the literature, in internal documents, and in interviews. We will mention the most important reasons here.

First, commanders at different levels within RSM reported on progress within their own part of the mission. They had an interest in reporting positive progress, for instance because it might affect their reputation or career, or in order to boost the motivation or sense of pride of their units or themselves.^{clii} Second, the US, which commanded RSM, wanted to show positive results for reasons related to domestic politics. They had invested over two trillion⁵⁶ dollars in Afghanistan, and wanted to show that it was not in vain. Other participating countries had a similar motivation not to jeopardise support for the mission through negative reporting.^{cliii} In the final years of the mission, it also played a role that the Doha Agreement and later Biden's withdrawal decision set an end date for RSM. This made the US even more eager than before to show that the ANDSF were strong enough, and Afghanistan secure enough, to withdraw troops.⁵⁷ Finally, NATO member states wanted to present NATO as a successful, strong, and united organisation. NATO staff and member states therefore kept projecting the same positive image, not only externally but also within the organisation itself.^{cliv}

⁵⁶ According to a 2022 estimate, the US had spent a total of \$2.3 trillion on war and reconstruction in Afghanistan, starting in 2001. Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 'US Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan' (www.watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022). The European Union also spent a lot of money in Afghanistan—more than €4 billion. No other country received as much money for development projects from the EU as Afghanistan. See Europa.eu, 'Afghanistan' (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/afghanistan_en#:~:text=The%202020%20Afghanistan%20conference%20sent,under%20the%20MFF%202021%2D2027).

⁵⁷ As the security situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate in the summer of 2021, NATO allies internally stressed the importance of 'strategic communications' to the outside world. Although they were aware that the ANDSF were in a very difficult position, they maintained that they had faith in the Afghan forces 'to counter the abandonment narrative' (Internal document from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Echo chamber

One consequence, according to those involved,^{clv} was collective wishful thinking: an 'echo chamber' in which staff within the NATO organisation and in participating countries kept on telling the same positive narrative, which they often even partly believed, and in which negative signs were not given sufficient attention. There were reports that the ANDSF and the mission were not doing well, for example from SIGAR, from intelligence services, from scientists, and from the media (see section 3.3). There were also NATO staff at headquarters and military and other personnel in Afghanistan who said that the desired progress on the part of the ANDSF was not being achieved and that the situation in Afghanistan was becoming increasingly unsafe. Those signs were, however, played down. The picture presented was of gradual progress in the ANDSF despite challenges, rather than of challenges that were so significant that structural progress was failing to materialise.

Another factor in this, according to those involved, was that people who had been involved in Afghanistan for years, who had sometimes lost colleagues, and knew how much money and effort had been invested, could simply not believe that little or no progress was being made.^{clvi}

Overly positive reporting in the Netherlands

The overly positive reporting also happened in the Netherlands. The ministries concerned received overly positive signals from NATO, and sometimes from Dutch military or other personnel who were on deployment in Afghanistan, about the state of the ANDSF and the overall security situation in the country.^{clvii} The MIVD was more negative in its reports to ministries, and so were some other Dutch personnel who were on deployment.^{clviii} But in weighing that information with other information—for the purpose of reporting to the House of Representatives, for instance—the ministries painted too positive an overall picture.^{clix} Although Parliamentary Letters talked about the poor security situation, about corruption, and about other challenges associated with the mission, they sometimes wrote about progress on the part of ANDSF and about the overall the security situation in overly positive or selective terms. This happened mainly in the first five years of the mission, up until 2020.⁵⁸

For example, the progress report to the House on 11 September 2017 states: “It is positive that the ANDSF is better able to resist the Taliban. However, they are not yet succeeding in pushing the Taliban farther back on their own.” But both NATO data and analysis by independent analysts show that the ANDSF did not improve their ability to resist the Taliban at all in the period from 2015 to 2017, but actually lost control of a large number of districts.⁵⁹ And while internal MIVD reports to the ministries throughout the mission painted a picture in which the security situation was getting worse and the independent functioning of the ANDSF was unremittingly problematic,^{clx} Letters to Parliament downplayed or omitted problems and accentuated potential bright spots, thus making the overall picture that was presented less negative. For example, the progress report of 19 June 2015^{clxi} states that the pressure on the ANDSF was “unremittingly high”—an unchanged situation—whereas, shortly before, the MIVD had warned that the pressure on the ANDSF had increased—a deteriorating situation. The progress report of 30 September 2016^{clxii} states: “The ANDSF are as yet unable to structurally turn the tide without international support”, whereas the MIVD reports of that year paint a much more negative picture, according to which the ANDSF were utterly dependent on US and RSM forces to be able to function at all, and even with that help could

⁵⁸ There are different possible explanations for this. Some staff from the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs indicated that the publication in late 2019/early 2020 of the Afghanistan Papers and IOB's evaluation of the police-training mission in Kunduz, respectively, had been influential. Both pieces describe how reporting on progress in Afghanistan was too positive. This led, among other things, to discussion in the House of Representatives and the adoption of the motions Bosman et al (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 699) and Kerstens/Van Ojik (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 697) on the independent evaluation of Dutch military mission contributions. In addition, starting in early 2020, the Dutch contribution to the mission was scaled back because of COVID-19, and the US signalled its intention, in the Doha Agreement, to end the mission unilaterally. It cannot be ruled out that these changes in the mission also contributed to a change in the narrative in Parliamentary Letters.

⁵⁹ In November 2015, the ANDSF still controlled 72% of districts, as against 57% in August 2017, according to RSM data. Other sources paint an even more negative picture.

only just keep the Taliban at bay.⁶⁰ The progress report of 19 May 2021 states, in regard to the SOAT training, that “the end result that was envisaged, namely that ATF-888 would be capable of operating independently (on a sustained basis)” had been achieved. As section 3.4 will discuss, it was true that ATF-888 was capable of conducting independent operations at the time, but this was a snapshot in time, and the sustainability of the unit’s ability to operate independently was not certain.

A number of factors contributed to this dynamic. Firstly, allied solidarity was an important reason for Dutch mission participation (see section 3.4), and for that same reason the government did not want to stop contributing to RSM. In addition, RSM’s failure to deliver as intended would present the Cabinet with a difficult choice. There was no support for intensifying the mission internationally and within the Netherlands: the intention behind RSM was precisely to scale back the international military presence. But the other option, withdrawing international troops while the ANDSF could not provide security on their own, might undo years of investment and risk civil war or a takeover of power. In that situation, it was thought better to continue contributing to RSM, despite signs of a lack of structural progress in the mission.^{clxiii}

Moreover, there was a certain ‘Afghanistan fatigue’ within the House of Representatives, the media, and the ministries. After years of Dutch involvement in Afghanistan, there was relatively little debate about, or coverage of, the mission in the media or in the House of Representatives.^{clxiv} As a result, compared to other missions, there was also relatively little attention for the mission within the ministries involved.^{61 clxv}

3.4 Achievement of objectives: The development of the ANDSF and security during the mission

Despite the problems with monitoring and reporting, some statements can be made about the development of the professionalism and independence of the ANDSF during the mission.

Small steps ANDSF

During the mission, teams of advisers from various coalition countries visited Afghan counterparts to offer training and advice. We will focus here specifically on the Dutch advisers, although their experiences were generally shared across RSM.

Several interviewees, both Dutch and Afghan, indicated that Dutch advisers and staff officers with advisory-related tasks helped improve the professional skills of certain counterparts, made ‘small steps’, or ‘planted seeds’. This was true of both Dutch military officers (including KMar) and police advisers.^{clxvi} Interviews with respondents and internal reports^{clxvii} give several examples of specific results achieved, often in cooperation with NATO officials from other countries. These examples include the following types of efforts:

- Trying to impart skills to individual counterparts, such as by giving advice on how to keep track of how much fuel the units consumed and on how to organise mission preparations at the tactical level.
- Arranging or conducting multi-person training sessions or classes, such as a training programme for Afghan casualty-care workers, training on the distribution of medical supplies, training for mechanics on the maintenance of vehicles, and English-language and computer classes. Assistance was also given to improve the curriculum for basic training for new Afghan police recruits.

⁶⁰ It is also notable in that regard that, on a number of occasions, Parliamentary Letters described successes on the part of the ANDSF without mentioning that these had come about only with the help of foreign, particularly US, troops. For instance, in the May 2019 progress report (Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 383, p. 5), we read: “It is clear that neither the Afghan government nor insurgents, such as the Taliban, are succeeding in resolving the conflict militarily. ... The Afghan government remains capable of controlling major cities and major population centres.”

⁶¹ At the same time as it was contributing to RSM, the Netherlands made military contributions to international missions in Mali (2014–2022) and Iraq (2015 to the present). These mission contributions received more attention in the House of Representatives and the media and, as a result, within the ministries involved.

- Steps to fight corruption, such as investigating when corruption was suspected and providing information as evidence so that corrupt officials could be fired.
- Specific efforts for helping Afghan female police officers. This included arranging childcare for them and ensuring that only women could be placed in certain positions within the police. Female police officers were also enabled to get their driving licences and attend courses such as on administrative skills and on handling improvised explosive devices. In addition, female officers were given advice on and help in dealing with the challenges they faced in the workplace.
- Not so much improving the professionalism or independence of the ANDSF, but taking care of business for the ANDSF. Examples include helping set up an airlift when the city of Kunduz was virtually sealed off during a prolonged Taliban attack in 2019, and building a dashboard overview on personnel and training for the Afghan police.

No evidence of structural improvements on the part of the ANDSF during the mission

Although small steps were made in helping Afghan counterparts, many of those involved in the regular⁶² TAA indicate that, during the mission, they did not feel progress was made in helping the Afghan security apparatus to become independent. They state either that they did not think they were achieving anything when it came to professionalising their counterparts, or that, if small steps were taken at all, these were not sustainable, did not lead to structural improvements, and were “drops in the ocean”.^{clxxviii}

This is in line with the picture that is emerging from non-NATO reports on RSM. SIGAR reports show that major problems with key functions in the ANDSF, such as supply, command and control, and logistics, persisted. The ANDSF’s reliance on foreign troops and contractors continued during the mission, particularly when it came to air and logistical support.^{clxxix} In addition, SIGAR repeatedly reported during the mission on the high number of wounded, dead, deserters, and ghost soldiers in the ANDSF.^{clxxx} The armed forces and police also continued to suffer from poor leadership and high levels of corruption, which, among other things, continued to cause low morale and low combat readiness among the Afghan troops.^{clxxxi}

Deteriorating security situation during the mission

Besides improving the professionalism and self-reliance of the ANDSF, the objective of RSM was also about the security context in which the ANDSF operated: that the ANDSF would be able to resist the Taliban and other insurgents. A clear trend on this score can be discerned during the mission, from 2015 to 2021: the Taliban kept gaining ground.⁶³ ^{clxxxii} This may have been because of the strength of the Taliban, and does not necessarily indicate a deterioration in the capabilities of the ANDSF, but it does indicate that RSM became ever further removed from achieving its goal. Moreover, the mission always remained in phase 1, because NATO did not yet deem the ANDSF capable of providing security on their own.

In the period during and after the Doha negotiations (2018–2021), intelligence agencies, independent analysts and academics warned that a complete US withdrawal would likely lead to civil war or to a Taliban takeover.^{clxxxiii} There were widespread concerns about the extent to which the ANDSF would be able to resist the Taliban in the event of a withdrawal of international forces, including among NATO allies.^{clxxxiv}

⁶² The situation when it came to training ATF-888 was different. See below, 'Progress was made by the ASSF'.

⁶³ Between November 2015 and October 2018, RSM monitored the control that the Afghan government and the Taliban each exercised over the districts in the country. This shows that, while the Afghan government controlled 72% of the districts in November 2015, in October 2018 it controlled only 54%. During the same period, the extent of Taliban control over districts increased from 7% to 12%, and the percentage of contested districts where neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban had effective control increased from 21% to 34%. From 2019, RSM stopped monitoring district control because NATO took the view that doing so would have little added value. Others who collected similar data, and who presented an even more negative picture than NATO did, continued to do so after 2019. According to the Long War Journal, for example, the percentage of districts controlled or influenced by the Taliban grew from 61% in May 2018 to 66% in May 2020.

Progress was made by the ASSF

Within two components of the ANDSF, more observable improvements were made during the mission: the AAF and the ASSF. The AAF conducted more flights itself, although it continued to rely on contractors for logistical support and maintenance during the mission.^{clxxxv} The special forces increasingly conducted operations without foreign support.

This also applied to ATF-888, the special police unit trained by the German-Dutch SOAT between 2018 and 2021. In March 2020, the unit was declared to be 'fully operationally capable' (FOC) by the NATO Special Operations Component Command Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) and the Afghan General Command of Police Special Units (GCPSU).⁶⁴

No clear picture emerges from the documentation about what 'FOC' actually meant. According to a September 2020 parliamentary letter, it meant that ATF-888 was capable of conducting operations outside the secured camps without SOAT guidance,^{clxxxvi} while the Parliamentary Letter of 19 May 2021 spoke of ATF-888 being capable of operating independently on a sustained basis,^{clxxxvii} and it had been set as an objective prior to the mission that ATF-888 should be able to sustain itself over the long term, for instance in terms of personnel and equipment.⁶⁵ The stakeholders who were interviewed also gave different interpretations of what FOC meant in practice, or said they did not know what it meant. For example, some respondents held that it meant that ATF-888 could conduct operations independently, while others argued that it only meant that enough Afghans had been trained for the whole unit and that they had appropriate equipment.^{clxxxviii}

It is also notable that, although ATF-888 had been declared FOC, the German-Dutch SOAT then decided to conduct quarterly 'Operational Capability Assessments' to "monitor and adjust the progress the ATF-888 was making on the way to becoming independent".^{clxxxix} This suggests that the SOAT was not taking the sustained operational independence of ATF-888 for granted at the moment in 2020 when the FOC declaration was made.

Although there is ambiguity about the exact meaning of FOC, the SOF advisers interviewed were often more positive about the capabilities of the people they had trained than were the other Dutch advisers. ATF-888 recruits had often undergone special pre-training before being trained by the SOAT,^{clxxx} they showed a high level of combat readiness, and they were motivated, especially compared to regular units. By 2020, ATF-888 had grown to a unit of four squadrons. Moreover, according to several respondents and internal documents, ATF-888 was capable of conducting operations without the SOAT accompanying them, although the unit did continue to rely on enablers, mainly in the form of air support.^{clxxxi}

However, it is impossible to say whether ATF-888 would ultimately have been able to continue to operate well, independently and in the long run, without foreign support. The fact that a unit can run operations independently at any given time is a different matter from whether it can continue to function as an organisation in the long term and "sustain itself over the long term". There were many problems within the ANDSF that could stop it from doing that, including corruption, patronage networks, poor leadership, dependence on international contractors and troops, a large number of casualties, and high staff turnover (see Chapter 4). Thus the ASSF, including ATF-888, were dependent on other components of the Afghan security apparatus (logistics, air support, medical support, intelligence, etc.), which meant that persistent problems and a dependence on foreign support within those components affected the functioning of ATF-888. Also, the relative success of the special units caused them to be overused,

⁶⁴ NSOCC-A is the American-led military organisation that commanded the non-US SOF units. The head of NSOCC-A was also the head of The Special Operations Joint Task Force - Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) under which the US SOF units fall. The commander of these organisations reported to the commander of RSM. The GCPSU was part of the Afghan Ministry of Interior, and was responsible for the special police units.

⁶⁵ See also section 2.2. Prior to the Dutch contribution to the SOAT, the Ministry of Defence identified 5 phases through which ATF-888 should go on the way to becoming fully autonomous. The final phase, which would allow the SOAT presence to be wound down, was defined as follows: progress should be sustained, so that ATF-888 would be able to sustain itself over the long term, among other things in terms of personnel and equipment. These phases were communicated to the House of Representatives in a technical briefing prior to the 5 July 2018 General Consultation on the Dutch deployment in Afghanistan.

including for activities that should actually have been carried out by regular units, with the result that the special units were overloaded.^{clxxxii} Moreover, because of COVID-19, the Operational Capability Assessments that the SOAT did of ATF-888 had to take place remotely, which hampered the visibility of the unit's performance.^{clxxxiii} Ultimately, it never became possible to test the extent to which ATF-888 could continue to perform sustainably, for years, on its own. Prior to the withdrawal of international forces, ATF-888 and the rest of the ANDSF did not operate entirely independently, given that they received support in the form of advice, intelligence, air support, and equipment, among other things – although they received less and less support as the withdrawal progressed. Even before the withdrawal was fully completed, the Taliban took control.

3.5 Achievement of objectives: Grounds for participation

Dutch grounds for participation in RSM

The Cabinet mentioned a number of 'grounds for participation' in the mission, both when it was announcing the participation of the Netherlands in the mission in 2014, and when it was announcing the various extensions. The exact wording varied across the various Parliamentary Papers, but important grounds for participation they set out were as follows:^{clxxxiv}

- a. Allied solidarity within NATO and the reputation of the Netherlands as a reliable partner in international fora;
- b. Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for terrorist organisations again;
- c. Reducing irregular migration;
- d. Contributing to consolidating positive developments in the areas of human rights, economic growth, and the rule of law.⁶⁶

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The exact status of these grounds for participation is not clear.⁶⁷ Indeed, they were formulated as reasons for contributing to the mission, i.e. as things the government wanted to achieve by contributing—in other words, as objectives of the Dutch contribution. We therefore briefly discuss here the extent to which these objectives were achieved.

Allied solidarity

The Article 100 letter dated 1 September 2014^{clxxxv} stated: “The Dutch contribution ... fulfils the need for allied solidarity within NATO, and is in line with the Dutch reputation as a reliable partner in international fora.” In interviews with stakeholders, allied solidarity emerged as one of the main reasons, if not *the* main reason, for joining the mission.^{clxxxvi} There was broad agreement within the Cabinet and amongst officials within the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs that NATO is important for Dutch security, and that if you are a member of an organisation, you should contribute your part. It was also considered important to show allied solidarity with Germany and to be seen by Germany as a reliable partner when it came to cooperation.

No comprehensive research was conducted for this evaluation on whether, in the eyes of all NATO allies, the reputation of the Netherlands as a 'reliable partner in international fora' was maintained by its contribution to RSM. A large number of interviewees for this review, mainly Dutch stakeholders and some foreign (NATO) cooperation partners, believe it was.^{clxxxvii}

⁶⁶ Other grounds for participation that were cited in the Article 100 letters were the need for security in Afghanistan, the need to protect the Afghan civilian population, and the need to have the many investments that had already been made to train the lower cadres in the army and police pay off. These grounds correspond more or less to the objectives of RSM.

⁶⁷ Those involved within the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs view this in different ways. Some interviewees argue that the grounds for participation were not objectives of the Dutch mission contribution; others, that they were in fact the main or the only Dutch objectives of that contribution.

Terrorism, migration, human rights, economic growth, and the rule of law

The other grounds for participation were based on a number of assumptions. First, there was the assumption that participating in RSM would help create an ANDSF that could maintain security independently. The second assumption was that, if it was safer in Afghanistan, this would reduce migration, prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorism, and be good for human rights, the rule of law, and economic growth in Afghanistan. This is shown in Figure 5, which depicts the theory of change behind the Dutch grounds for participation.⁶⁸



Figure 5: Theory of change underpinning the Dutch grounds for participation in RSM

The previous sections have stated that the Netherlands was unable to contribute to structural improvements in the self-reliance of the ANDSF or in the security situation. Based on the theory of change, it can be concluded that the commitment of the Netherlands to RSM also failed to contribute to structural improvements in migration, terrorism, human rights, the rule of law, and economic growth.

It is also notable that contributing to the fight against terrorism, to reducing migration, and to promoting human rights, economic growth, and the rule of law are very large and rather different objectives. Although the Netherlands also tried to contribute to meeting these objectives through development cooperation projects, among other things, the objectives were nevertheless formulated as specific grounds for participating in RSM. The causal link between such large and diverse policy ambitions and the relatively small Dutch mission deployment of 100 – 160 people is quite indirect. If improvement were to be observed in migration figures, terrorism, human rights, the economy, or the rule of law in Afghanistan, it is impossible to determine whether and to what extent the Netherlands had contributed to these by virtue of its commitment to RSM. After all, there are a range of other factors that have much more influence on these matters.⁶⁹ And if no improvement were observed in these matters, it could not be ruled out that the Dutch effort had contributed a little to them after all. This makes it difficult for the Cabinet to be accountable to the House of Representatives for the extent to which it actually contributed to the ambitions it listed as reasons for contributing to the mission.

⁶⁸ This figure shows the theory of change of the Dutch grounds for participation prior to the mission, in 2014. From 2018, in addition to the 10 advisers, 60 people were added for the training by the SOAT of the ATF-888. This theory of change is not the 'official' theory of change for Dutch participation in RSM. In our research, we did not find a theory of change that had been drafted by the Cabinet, and we constructed one based on our research.

⁶⁹ Factors that influenced all grounds for participation included international financial support for development cooperation programmes in Afghanistan, military efforts by other countries, and cultural, political and economic developments in Afghanistan, Afghanistan's neighbours, Europe, and the US. In addition, for each of the grounds, there were several specific factors that exercised far more influence than did the Dutch contribution to RSM. Economic growth in Afghanistan, for example, depended heavily on the fact that the economy ran largely on donor money (see section 4.1), and counterterrorism was the explicit objective of the counterterrorism component of the US OFS mission (see section 2.1).

Moreover, the assumptions behind the grounds for participation—that if the ANDSF could provide security independently, migration would be reduced, Afghanistan would not be a haven for terrorism, and human rights, the rule of law and economic growth would be promoted—were not substantiated in the Article-100 letters. It is not certain whether all these assumptions are correct. For example, economic growth in poor countries such as Afghanistan often actually leads to more migration rather than less,⁷⁰ which makes it unlikely that Dutch participation in RSM could have contributed to both economic growth and lower migration.

Finally, it is notable that the government did not consistently formulate the grounds for participation. For example, the various Article-100 letters alternately speak of countering terrorism against Western targets,^{clxxxviii} terrorism against both the Afghan people and the international rule of law,^{clxxxix} and “international terrorism”.^{ccc} The determination of the effectiveness or otherwise of the means deployed—the contribution to RSM—will depend on which of these objectives the government pursued. For example, the number of terrorist attacks⁷¹ against the Afghan population dropped after the end of RSM,⁷² for the simple reason that the organisation that provided most of the attacks and casualties, the Taliban, itself came to power.⁷³ But how the risk of *international terrorism* emanating from Afghanistan has evolved since the takeover is unclear.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ See, for example, the IOB study ‘Ontwikkeling en Migratie’, which describes the complexity of how different factors did or did not influence migration (www.iob-evaluatie.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2018/10/01/427-%E2%80%93-iob-%E2%80%93-ontwikkeling-en-migratie-%E2%80%93-literatuurstudie). See also IOB’s evaluation of the Dutch contribution to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. It describes how from 2015 onwards, the government, for political reasons, added the need to counter migration to the grounds for participation in that mission, while this was described within the UN as unrealistic and local organisations and administrators indicated that the impact of the Dutch contribution on irregular migration was virtually non-existent. See IOB (2022), ‘Een Missie in een Missie, Evaluatie van de Nederlandse Bijdrage aan MINUSMA’, Chapter 7 (www.iob-evaluatie.nl/publicaties/rapporten/2022/09/30/evaluatie-nederlandse-bijdrage-minusma).

⁷¹ The National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security defines terrorism as “The ideologically motivated perpetration of violence aimed at human life, or the infliction of societally disruptive property damage, with the aim of bringing about societal disruption and destabilisation, instilling grave fears in the population, or influencing political decision-making.” See NCTV, ‘Definities gebruikt in het Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland’ (www.nctv.nl/onderwerpen/dtn/definities-gebruikt-in-het-dtn).

⁷² According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, Afghanistan consistently ranked among the top three countries most affected by terrorism in the years when RSM was being conducted (Institute for Economics & Peace, ‘Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism’, p. 19 (<http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>). In particular, the Taliban and its Haqqani network were responsible for this, as well as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a strategic and ideological rival of the Taliban.

⁷³ However, several attacks by ISKP have been in the news since the Taliban took power, including a suicide attack in front of the Russian embassy in Kabul, an attack on an educational centre for women and girls, and several attacks on mosques. And apart from terrorist attacks, the Taliban have caused casualties in other ways since taking power, including extrajudicial killings, torture and far-reaching restrictions on the rights of women and girls. See UNAMA, ‘Human Rights in Afghanistan, 15 August 2021 – 15 June 2022’, July 2022 (www.unama.unmissions.org/human-rights-monitoring-and-reporting), and USIP, ‘The Taliban Continue to Tighten Their Grip on Afghan Women and Girls’, December 2022 (www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/taliban-continue-tighten-their-grip-afghan-women-and-girls).

⁷⁴ The Taliban have said publicly that they are abiding by the Doha Agreement’s commitment not to provide refuge to terrorist organisations. (See, for example, an interview with Taliban leader Anas Haqqani, Al Jazeera, 14 August 2022 (www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/14/taliban-leader-anas-haqqani-speaks-to-al-jazeera). At the same time, a UN report in May 2022 stated that Al-Qaeda has a ‘safe haven’ and ‘increased freedom of action’ in Afghanistan under the new Taliban regime, and that there is a ‘close relationship’ between the two organisations. This seems to have been confirmed by the liquidation of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul through a drone attack by the US, in August 2022. Indeed, the fact that al-Zawahiri lived in Kabul suggests that the Taliban do have links with Al-Qaeda, or at least provide refuge to Al-Qaeda members.



4 Explanatory factors

Summary

- A direct cause of the Taliban's seizure of power was the unilateral decision by the United States to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan, thus terminating RSM de facto, even though it was known that the ANDSF were not yet capable of providing security on their own.
- Several problems in design and execution of RSM meant that its objectives, and those of the Dutch contribution to it, were achieved only to a limited extent: specific objectives for the advisers and their counterparts were lacking, there was inadequate guidance from NATO, there were few contact moments between advisers and counterparts, advisers were rotated in and out too quickly, and the level of motivation among many Afghan counterparts was limited.
- In addition, there were wider factors that limited the effectiveness of RSM and of the Dutch contribution to it. Starting in 2001, the international coalition tried to build an Afghan state based on a Western model that did not fit the Afghan reality—a state over which both the population and government officials felt limited ownership. The large influx of foreign money created a rentier state that fostered patronage networks, nepotism, and large-scale corruption. The poor security situation made it especially difficult to build a security apparatus, because soldiers and police officers were also needed to fight the Taliban even as they were still being trained. The Afghan security apparatus was equipped with modern, maintenance-intensive weapons systems, with the result that they were dependent on foreign troops and contractors who had specialist knowledge.
- Many of these factors were also known before RSM started, and they made unrealistic any expectation that RSM and the Dutch contribution to it would, with the means and methods employed, achieve the objectives that had been set.

The previous chapter showed that during the Resolute Support mission, from 2015 to 2021, no significant structural progress could be observed in the levels of professionalism and self-reliance of the ANDSF, with the exception of the ASSF and the AAF. After the end of RSM and the Taliban's seizure of power, it became clear that the long-term objective of RSM had not been achieved either: that the ANDSF would be able to maintain security and permanently resist the Taliban and other insurgents.

This chapter describes the main factors that limited the extent to which RSM's objectives were achieved. We make an analytical distinction between external and internal factors. The external factors were issues that were broader than RSM, and on which it, and the Netherlands, had little or no influence, but that did impact the achievement of the mission's objectives. The internal factors were elements in the design or execution of RSM that affected the extent to which the mission achieved its objectives.

4.1 External factors that influenced RSM's ability to achieve its objectives

Western state model and limited ownership on the part of Afghan officials

The US and other Western countries had been trying to build an Afghan state based on a Western model since the Bonn Agreement in 2001. A strong democratic state with an open-market economy and a monopoly on violence should mean that Afghanistan could never again become a haven for terrorism.^{cxci} However, the attempt to build such an Afghan state created a number of problems and contradictions.^{cxcii}

A centrally organised democracy ruled from Kabul did not fit well in the Afghan context, where political power was largely decentralised, and where there was no Western democratic tradition. In this context, people, including ANDSF officials, often felt more loyalty to local or ethnic groups and to local rulers than to the new Afghan state.^{cxci} Among other things, this contributed to fragmentation in the command of the ANDSF (see below) and to low combat willingness among ANDSF troops. In addition, the new system in practice favoured certain sections of the population and disadvantaged others, especially in rural areas. This eroded support for the state, and eventually increased support for the Taliban (see also below under 'Taliban').^{cxci}

Western donors praised the democratic transition Afghanistan underwent after the Bonn Agreement.⁷⁵ At the same time, there were doubts in Western countries about the capabilities of the new government, and they wanted to maintain control over the funds they provided as aid. A large number of development programmes were therefore implemented outside the Afghan government, while Afghan politicians and government officials insisted the Afghan government should have more say. This created tensions in the relationship between the Afghan government and Western donors. In the years that followed, the Afghan government had limited ownership of state institutions, military strategy and political issues.^{cxci}

During the 2014 elections, large-scale fraud was reported, and both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah claimed to have won. Under US pressure, a 'National Unity Government' was formed, in which Ghani became the president and Abdullah was given a newly devised position: chief executive.^{cxci} However, the unity government effectively consisted of two different camps. This made it difficult to pursue unified policies. It also had repercussions for the management of the ANDSF. The Afghan Ministry of Defence and the Afghan intelligence agency NDS (National Directorate of Security) fell under the influence of President Ghani. Yet the interior ministry, which dealt with the police, came under the influence of Chief Executive Abdullah. Ghani tried to increase his influence across the ANDSF, including the police. This led to further tensions between Ghani and Abdullah.^{cxci}

The fragmentation within the government in Kabul hindered the centralisation of the monopoly on violence and weakened the clout of the ANDSF. Problems at the national level were also felt at the provincial level. For example, the fragmented management of the ANDSF led to an ineffective response against the advancing Taliban in Kunduz in 2015. Partly because of this, the Taliban were able to temporarily take over the city of Kunduz in October 2015.^{cxci}

⁷⁵ A new constitution was adopted and presidential elections were organised in 2004. Hamid Karzai won these elections.

Rentier state

The Afghan state relied largely on foreign aid after the Taliban was ousted in 2001. Foreign financial support for the government was still relatively modest in the early years, but then grew rapidly and eventually reached astronomical proportions.^{76 cxcix}

The large inflow of foreign money made the Afghan government largely dependent on donors economically. Afghanistan is therefore referred to in academic literature as a rentier state, in which it is not taxation of the population that keeps the state running, but funds received as foreign aid.^{cc} A consequence of this high dependency was that positions within the government became valuable, given that they afforded access to foreign money. For those without access to a position in government, it was crucial to build connections with government officials. This further encouraged the already prevalent patronage and nepotism, as well as corruption.^{cci}

Corruption

Corruption was a major unintended consequence of the large amount of financial aid that went to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, combined with patronage networks, nepotism, and limited oversight of how money was used. At all levels, from ministers to governors, and from local government officials to police officers, there was corruption within the Afghan state. Corruption also played a role in previous Afghan governments, but the level of corruption in the years after the overthrow of the Taliban reached unprecedented levels.⁷⁷

The US and other NATO allies turned a blind eye to corruption for several years as they depended on their Afghan counterparts to achieve political and security objectives.^{ccii} From 2010, the international community in Afghanistan placed more emphasis on the importance of fighting corruption, but widespread corruption remained a problem.^{cciii} Examples of corruption within the ANDSF that were cited by those involved in the Dutch contribution to RSM included withholding money and equipment, and selling petrol that was actually meant for police or defence vehicles.^{cciv} Consequences of the widespread corruption included, amongst others, that needed equipment often went missing or malfunctioned, and that military and police officers often went unpaid because money had disappeared. This was bad for the morale of the ANDSF troops. In addition, large-scale corruption eroded the legitimacy of the Afghan government and the ANDSF in the eyes of the population.^{ccv}

Insecurity

Besides corruption, a lack of security became an increasing problem between 2005 and 2021. Despite all the investments, and even with the help of the international coalition, the Afghan government did not manage to prevent the Taliban from growing stronger. Under those circumstances, it was especially difficult to build a military and police force that functioned well, as people who were still being trained were needed in the field as soon as possible. Limited training contributed to a high casualty rate, which in turn meant that new soldiers and officers had to be trained again and again.^{ccvi}

⁷⁶ The World Bank reported in 2019, for example, that more than 75% of the Afghan government's total spending was funded by grants. Total government expenditure was US\$11 billion, while government revenue was US\$2.5 billion. See World Bank, 'Afghanistan: 'Public Expenditure Update'', 29 July 2019 (www.documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/696491564082281122/pdf/Afghanistan-Public-Expenditure-Update.pdf).

⁷⁷ Afghanistan was repeatedly identified in both World Bank and Transparency International rankings as among the most corrupt countries in the world. See, for example, SIGAR (2016), 'Corruption in Conflict', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 5. In 2021, 85.4% of Afghan citizens reported that corruption was a major problem in their daily lives (Asia Foundation (2021), 'Afghanistan Flash Surveys on Perceptions of Peace, Covid-19, and the Economy', p. 12).

Gradually, a situation developed in which the Afghan government, the US, and NATO were simultaneously trying to build peace and wage war. This created some inconsistencies in the strategy that was chosen.^{ccvii} An important contradiction was that, on the one hand, attempts were made to place the monopoly on violence in the hands of the Afghan central government, but on the other hand, decisions were made that actually worked against that. For example, the government in Kabul, the US, and NATO struck deals with local warlords to help fight the Taliban. In exchange for cooperation, these warlords often obtained positions within the government as, for example, governor or provincial police chief. They could also have their personal militias become part of the ANDSF. Partly because of this, certain units within the ANDSF remained loyal to a warlord rather than to the government in Kabul, so that it happened, for instance, that ANDSF troops fought each other.^{78 ccviii}

Several American- and allied-led military operations since 2001 also partly undermined the Afghan government's monopoly on violence and legitimacy. The US and its allies tried to track down terrorists and Taliban leaders. Civilians were regularly killed in the process. This was bad for the popular support for international troops and the Afghan government.^{ccix}

Taliban

As described in the previous chapters, the Taliban controlled or influenced more and more areas from 2005 on. At first this happened mainly in rural parts of the country. In some of the areas, the Taliban set up an alternative administration with Taliban governors, their own judges, and taxation of the population.^{ccx} In other areas, they were not fully in power, but they had close ties with local leaders and the population. Politically, the Taliban tried to exploit the Afghan government's dependence on foreign donors. The narrative that the Taliban communicated to the population was that the Afghan government consisted of Western-backed corrupt infidels who needed to be driven out of Afghanistan. The Taliban cast themselves as the guardians of Afghan nationalism and Islamic and traditional norms and values. They also stressed that they were not corrupt and that they could provide security and stability. This narrative was effective, in that it meant that the Taliban were perceived by much of the population, especially in rural areas, as a better alternative to the government in Kabul.^{ccxi}

Another reason the Taliban gained influence was the support it received from other countries, including Pakistan's security service, ISI.^{79 ccxii} The US and NATO allies were aware of this, but the diplomatic pressure the US and NATO could exert on the Pakistani government was limited.⁸⁰ This was partly because they depended on Pakistan to supply their troops in Afghanistan because the main supply routes were through Pakistan.^{ccxiii} Under the Trump administration, support for the Pakistani government was halted, but this too did not seem to bring about a change of direction in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.^{ccxiv}

⁷⁸ An example of this during RSM happened in Mazar-e Sharif in March 2019. The government in Kabul wanted to replace Balkh province police chief Akram Sami. Former governor and warlord Atta Noor opposed this. Akram Sami, who was loyal to Atta, holed up in the police headquarters in Balkh. Along with other policemen and an Atta Noor militia, he fought the special police units accompanying the new police chief, Abdul Raqib Mubarez, on his arrival in Mazar-e Sharif. This included people from ATF-888, the special police unit trained by the German-Dutch SOAT. After several hours, the old police chief was overpowered, and Mubarez was installed in his post. However, Mubarez had to leave after only a month following negotiations between Atta Noor and the government in Kabul. See RFE/RL (2019), 'Rival Police Clash In North Afghan City in Spat between President, Ex-Governor'; Azami, A. S. (2021), 'Warlords, the United States, and the State of Anarchy in Afghanistan', *Central European Journal of Politics* 7(1): 46–75, pp. 61–62.

⁷⁹ Pakistan had a complex relationship with the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan government repeatedly pointed out that Pakistani security forces were supporting the Taliban, but the Pakistani government always formally denied this. A number of scholars and investigative journalists have examined the relationship between the Pakistani security forces and the Afghan Taliban. They have shown that the ISI ((Directorate for) Inter-Services Intelligence) provided a base of operations for parts of the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan. In addition, the ISI is also said to have provided money, resources, and training.

⁸⁰ US Admiral Mike Mullen had shown evidence to the ISI in 2011 presenting links between the ISI and a number of militant groups. In particular, this would involve the ISI's links with the Haqqani network. For a public source, see The New York Times, 'Pakistan's Spy Agency Supported U.S. Embassy Attack' (www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html).

A dependent ANDSF

During RSM, the ANDSF continued to rely on international troops and international contractors for many functions (see section 2.1). The Americans and NATO allies had built, in the Western image, an Afghan security apparatus that had modern weapons systems. These were maintenance-intensive and required specialist knowledge, which was lacking or insufficient within the ANDSF.⁸¹ A number of tasks could therefore not be handed over to the Afghans which limited the self-reliance of the ANDSF.^{ccv} Partly as a result, foreign troops, particularly from the US, actively assisted the ANDSF in fighting the Taliban throughout RSM, for example with air support and intelligence.

A flawed peace process and the US withdrawal

During RSM, several NATO allies increasingly focused on a 'political solution' to the conflict. They advocated for a peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban in order to end the violence. However, as described in Chapter 2, the US under President Trump decided to negotiate bilaterally with the Taliban, without the participation of the Afghan government. That eventually led to the Doha Agreement in 2020.

The Doha agreement gave away much of the leverage the US had had with the Taliban. Setting a date for US withdrawal from Afghanistan without attaching hard conditions for it ensured that the Taliban had little incentive to reach a peace agreement with the Afghan government. Indeed, between the date of the signing of the Doha agreement (29 February 2020) and the agreed US withdrawal (1 May 2021), the Taliban was able to prepare for an offensive. Whereas previously there had still seemed to be some willingness on the part of the Taliban to negotiate, they were now betting more and more on military victory.^{ccvi}

When President Biden announced in April 2021 that the US would indeed withdraw all its troops, many thought the ANDSF would not be able to guarantee security in Afghanistan. Several analysts and US generals therefore advised Biden to maintain a US and NATO presence in Afghanistan, but this advice was ignored. SIGAR concluded that the main reason for the collapse of the ANDSF in 2021 was Biden's decision to withdraw all troops.^{ccvii} As described in chapter two, this further eroded the already low morale of the ANDSF, and the well-known problems with logistics, leadership, intelligence and air support caused parts of the ANDSF to become isolated and/or unable to function properly. Some sections of the ANDSF fought the Taliban, while other units fled or surrendered.

4.2 Internal factors that influenced RSM's ability to achieve its objectives

The previous section described a number of external factors that impacted the extent to which RSM's objectives were achieved. In this section, we describe the main internal factors—elements in the design or execution of the mission—that impacted the achievement of the objectives both of the mission itself and of the Dutch contribution to it. While all these factors were in play across RSM and were not unique to the Dutch contribution, they directly contributed to the extent to which the Dutch contribution was effective. We therefore focus specifically on the Dutch contribution when describing these factors.

Lack of direction and of objectives for advisers

Within NATO headquarters, an operational plan for RSM had been formulated, including matters such as the main purpose of the mission, how many people would be deployed, the eight key functions of the ANDSF where improvements were to be made, and the phases described in chapter 2. At a lower operational level, however, there was no clear development plan for the specific ANDSF officers who were being advised, and in the TAA sessions with their counterparts, advisers did not have specific targets or milestones for what they were to achieve.^{ccviii}

⁸¹ The maintenance of aircraft of the Afghan Air Force is a case in point. SIGAR (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 83.

The lack of direction and objectives for the advisers had several consequences. First, it was not clear how the TAA in question could best contribute to achieving the ultimate objective of the mission. Nor was it clear to what extent the TAA was meeting the needs of counterparts and how the knowledge that was being imparted was preserved. Another result, though not the case for all advisers, was that various interviewees describe the content of the advisory sessions as just chatting, with no clear purpose.^{ccxix}

A final consequence was that the interpretation and execution of the advisory role depended on who held the role at any given time. It would thus happen that, after a rotation, a new adviser would not build on what their predecessor had done, but would take a different approach. What also played a role here was that people in the many different countries contributing to RSM had different practices and areas of focus. Because the Afghan counterparts had multiple advisers, all of whom interpreted the TAA differently, it was not clear to them what to expect from the advisers.^{ccxx}

A positive exception within RSM were those who trained the ASSF, including Dutch instructors. The German-Dutch SOAT did have set milestones when training ATF-888, and progress on the part of the unit was monitored throughout the training.^{ccxxi}

Rotations

Dutch advisers and staff officers were usually⁸² on deployment for six months, after which they would be rotated out again and replaced by a colleague.^{ccxxii} Despite the fact that there was generally a so-called handover-takeover between advisers,^{ccxxiii} the six-month period was too short for sustainable results to be achieved.^{ccxxiv} First, the period was too short for advisers to fully understand the country, the culture, and the complexities of the context in which their counterparts were operating. For instance, how power relations, patronage networks, ethnic relations, and corruption impacted their counterparts. That also made it difficult to create a collective memory on which to build.^{ccxxv} Second, building good working and trusting relationships with counterparts was essential if the TAA was to succeed. However, this was difficult to achieve in six months, especially as there were few contact moments between advisers and counterparts (see below). Another hindrance here was that many Afghan counterparts had already had more than ten, and sometimes even twenty, advisers because of the short rotations and the numerous missions that had taken place since 2001.^{ccxxvi}

In addition, all countries participating in RSM had their own rotation schedules, and schedules were not aligned across countries. Some countries had rotations after four months, some after six, and others after a year. Some Afghan counterparts received simultaneous TAA from multiple advisers⁸³ from different countries who rotated regularly at different times. They thus had to deal with new advisers very frequently. All this was at the expense of the continuity of the TAA being given.^{ccxxvii}

Contact moments

A third factor that limited the effectiveness of the mission was that there were few points of contact between many of the advisers and their Afghan counterparts. This was a wider problem within RSM and also applied to some of the Dutch military (incl. KMar) and police advisers. For instance, there were Dutch advisers who saw their counterpart once or twice a week, or once every fortnight. There were also advisers who saw their counterparts even less frequently, say once every three weeks or every six weeks. It even happened, especially towards the end of the mission, that advisers had only telephone contact with their Afghan counterpart during their six-month deployment, and never met them in person.^{ccxxviii}

⁸² An exception were Dutch police officers deployed to PIAT, who were usually sent on deployment to the mission area for a year. In another exception to the six-month period, KMar advisers from the PIAT were on deployment for four months at a time during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also times when a six-month deployment was divided in two, with two people going for three months each.

⁸³ For example because they were advised on different topics, such as gender and logistics.

There were a number of reasons for the limited number of contact moments. A significant reason was the security requirements for field visits, and the limited availability of force protection and helicopter capacity.^{ccxxxix} Moreover, the security situation in Afghanistan was sometimes so bad that advisers, regardless of the availability of force protection, were not allowed outside the camp to visit their counterparts.^{ccxxx} Two other issues also played a role during the final years of RSM. As described in Chapter 2, the mission was scaled back starting in early 2020, because of both the Doha Agreement and the COVID-19 pandemic. A large number of advisers, including those from the Netherlands, were sent home. Others could stay in touch only online with their Afghan counterparts because of COVID-19, which often did not work well in practice.^{ccxxxi}

The fact that contact moments were few and far between meant that it was difficult to achieve concrete results^{ccxxxii} and to build effective relationships with Afghan counterparts.^{ccxxxiii} Moreover, a number of respondents indicated that, when they did manage to meet with their counterparts, the security requirements associated with such a visit meant that it was difficult to establish a trusting relationship with them.⁸⁴ ^{ccxxxiv}

SOAT

A positive exception regarding contact moments was the contribution of the Dutch Special Operations Forces to the SOAT starting in 2018. They had more-frequent contact with their Afghan counterparts, in this case from the Afghan special police unit ATF-888, than was generally the case with other Dutch advisers.^{ccxxxv} One reason for this was that they trained an entire unit, including the lower cadres, whereas the regular TAA was mainly focused on advising individual officers of the upper cadres⁸⁵ of the police and armed forces.^{ccxxxvi} A second reason the SOAT trainers had more contact moments was that they accompanied ATF-888 during operations when possible.⁸⁶ ^{ccxxxvii} A third reason was that the ATF-888 training took place mostly at one location, Camp Eagle. This camp was next to Camp Marmal, where the Dutch advisers were stationed (see section 2.2). In contrast, the advisers who provided TAA for more-senior officers had to go to different locations and were more dependent on the availability of force protection.

Police

The limited number of contact moments was especially significant in the case of the Afghan police, the ANP, to which many of the Dutch advisers were attached. TAAC-N police advisers, including those from the Netherlands, focused on police zones⁸⁷ 707 and 808. The units from police zone 707 were scattered in several locations around Mazar-e Sharif, so a small group of advisers served a large number of ANP units in these locations. Safe movement to and between ANP sites required force protection, which was available only to a limited extent.^{ccxxxviii} For police zone 808, the TAA took place at Camp Pamir, which was located in Kunduz, 150 kilometres away from the base in Mazar-e Sharif.

⁸⁴ For example, advisers had to visit their counterparts wearing a shrapnel vest and under force protection. These protective measures could appear intimidating or suspicious to Afghan counterparts.

⁸⁵ Upper cadres here means at the level of staff, headquarters, and institutions such as ministries.

⁸⁶ This was true up until the global outbreak of COVID-19, after which guidance could no longer be given and the number of contact moments dropped.

⁸⁷ Afghanistan was divided into eight police zones, which generally corresponded to the areas where the ANA corps were responsible. Northern Afghanistan contained ANP zones 707 and 808. See Department of Defense, 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, June 2017', p. 77, and Department of Defense, 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, June 2016', pp. 7–8. For a map of these police zones, see SIGAR (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR, p. 121.

The Dutch advisers could, in principle, be flown there only by CH-53 helicopter,⁸⁸ but because of limited capacity on these helicopters, TAA from the Dutch advisers could take place only to a limited extent in Kunduz.⁸⁹ cccxxix

Moreover, the Dutch advisers at the PIAT in Kabul, especially those who had been sent on deployment by the police, served for only a relatively short time before the mission was scaled back (see section 2.2).

A final reason for the limited number of contact moments is that the limited force protection available was used more often for advisers to the Afghan armed forces rather than for advisers to the Afghan police.^{ccxi} The reason for this is as follows.

TAA for the Afghan police within RSM: a lower priority

Dutch advisers for the most part gave TAA to Afghan police officers. However, within the RSM, less priority was given to the Afghan police than to the Afghan armed forces both by RSM headquarters and by TAAC-N command and control.^{ccxli} Already from the beginning of the mission, there was less monitoring of, and assistance for, police training across the country.⁹⁰ ccxlii For instance, there were significantly fewer advisers to the Afghan police; about 20 of the 120 to 125 advisers at TAAC-N.^{ccxliii} In addition, police advisers worked 'hybrid', which meant they provided TAA to various units of the police.^{ccxliv} This is in contrast to the Dutch Armed Forces advisers who were attached to a single Corps, the 209th. The limited group of police advisers who were working on a 'hybrid' basis had to serve officers from many different police units, with the result that these officers received less attention.^{ccxlv}

Suitability of advisers for civilian and other advisory tasks

Many military personnel deployed to RSM provided advice and training to Afghan officials from the armed forces, police, and ministries on issues that were not of a specifically military nature, such as corruption, human resources, and the rule of law. However, many countries, when they were sending military personnel, did not consider the extent to which these people had the knowledge to advise on civilian tasks or the pedagogical skills to act as advisers or trainers. The countries that contributed to RSM mostly sent people based on who was available at the time rather than on their suitability for their roles. NATO also did not check the suitability of the deployed personnel for their roles as advisers in the mission: that was seen as a national responsibility. As a result, many advisers in RSM were not suited to their roles.⁹¹ ccxlii We found no evidence that this also applied to the Dutch advisers who were sent on deployment.⁹²

⁸⁸ Within TAAC-N, MI-17 helicopters (with limited self-defence capabilities) were frequently used, but not by the Netherlands at elevated threat levels. In that case, the use of this helicopter was authorised by the SNR only in the event of serious operational or personnel circumstances. (Internal documents from the Ministry of Defence).

⁸⁹ In 2020, the regional command structure with police zones was abolished. As a result, many issues that had been managed centrally were decentralised, and the area for which TAAC-N was responsible was fragmented. In practice, this meant that the advisers would have to implement a separate improvement programme in nine provinces. This proved to be unfeasible for all nine provinces, with the result that the ANP advisory function was limited to a few locations in Balkh and Kunduz provinces (Parliamentary paper 27925, no 784, p. 7, and an internal document from the Ministry of Defence).

⁹⁰ The development and functioning of the Afghan police had been problematic for years before RSM started. Within the international coalition, there was no coherent view on the role the Afghan police should play. European countries, especially Germany but also the Netherlands, focused on building a civilian police force over the years. By contrast, the US focused on building a militarised police force. Over the years, the US approach became the more dominant one. On this, see Friesendorf, C., and Krempel, J. (2011), 'Militarized versus Civilian Policing: Problems of Reforming the Afghan National Police', Frankfurt: PRIF; SIGAR (2022), 'Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, Arlington, VA: SIGAR; SIGAR (2017), 'Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan', Arlington, VA: SIGAR.

⁹¹ According to SIGAR, the failure of the US to get the right people into the right roles at the right time was 'one of the most significant failures of the mission'. US personnel were often found to be unqualified or poorly trained—see SIGAR (2021), 'What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction', pp. x and 52.

⁹² In general, however, Dutch nationals who go on deployment as advisers or trainers often do not receive specialised training in giving advice or training (Wiltenburg, I., 'Security Force Assistance: Practised but Not Substantiated', *Military Spectator* 188, no. 2, 2019, pp. 88–89; interviews with staff at the Ministry of Defence.)

A lack of motivation among Afghan counterparts

Another factor that hampered the success of the TAA was a lack of motivation among Afghan counterparts. Although this did not apply to all Afghan counterparts, in the interviews it was regularly mentioned by Dutch personnel who had been sent on deployment. Afghan counterparts showed little initiative, and rarely asked for advice on particular issues. Consequently, the TAA was often driven by supply rather than demand.^{ccxlvii} Some interviewees also indicated that counterparts were uninterested or unreceptive to the TAA.^{ccxlviii}

One reason for the lack of motivation is that aspects of the TAA did not match local needs. For example, some interviewees said that the Afghan counterparts were not interested in advice but only felt the need to get money or goods. Counterparts tried to get to this through their advisers. If they did not succeed in getting what they wanted with an adviser, they knew that a few months later there would be a new adviser with whom they could try again.^{ccxlix}

The lack of motivation is also partly explained by the rapid and thus numerous rotations that NATO advisers went through. As already indicated, some Afghan recipients of TAA had had many different advisers over the years, and/or saw each assigned adviser only a few times.

Other causes of low motivation among Afghan counterparts include the broader factors mentioned in section 4.1, such as the Western model of the state that did not fit the local culture, a limited sense of ownership and loyalty to the Afghan state among Afghan officials, patronage networks, and corruption.

Gender

A positive exception in terms of motivation applied to the female counterparts of gender advisers, who were generally motivated. Female Afghan respondents also indicated that they felt supported by the Dutch gender advisers and that the TAA met their needs.^{cd} As described in Chapter 3, in addition to the help they got to increase their knowledge and skills, they were also given advice on how to deal with challenges within the male-dominated organisation. Moreover, the gender advisers themselves also raised issues with Afghan commanders.

However, while Afghan female counterparts were mostly motivated to improve their own situation and that of other women within the ANDSF, this was regularly not true for the Afghan men the gender advisers were dealing with. These were often not interested or did not want to engage with the gender advisers.^{ccli} Consequently, Afghan women at the ANDSF faced many challenges, including harassment and threats in the workplace and within their personal environment. Women were often not taken seriously at work, and were even at risk of violence or abuse by male colleagues.^{cclii} When gender advisers were in place, Afghan women could go to them for help when problems arose. After the gender advisers left in 2020^{ccliii} and Afghan women no longer had anyone to fall back on, many male colleagues no longer took women seriously and their positions deteriorated again.^{ccliv}

Various interviewees also indicated that there was little motivation not only on the part of Afghan men for the mission's gender-related objectives, but also on the part of several NATO allies. While some gender advisers indicated that they felt well supported within NATO, a number of other interviewees stated that, although gender was addressed on paper within NATO, in practice there was little motivation or attention to it from various NATO colleagues.^{cclv} Moreover, as noted earlier, the few existing gender positions in 2020 were declared 'non-essential' and were eliminated even before the mission had come to an end.^{cclvi}

Conclusion: an unrealistic mission plan

In this chapter, we described several factors that influenced the extent to which RSM and the Dutch contribution to it were able to improve the professionalism and self-reliance of the ANDSF, and ensure that the ANDSF were independently able to resist the Taliban. Figure 6⁹³ shows the theory of change of RSM (at the start of the mission) and the various factors involved.

⁹³ This figure shows the theory of change prior to the mission, in 2014. During the mission, troop numbers fluctuated, and parts of the focus of mission changed (see Chapter 2).

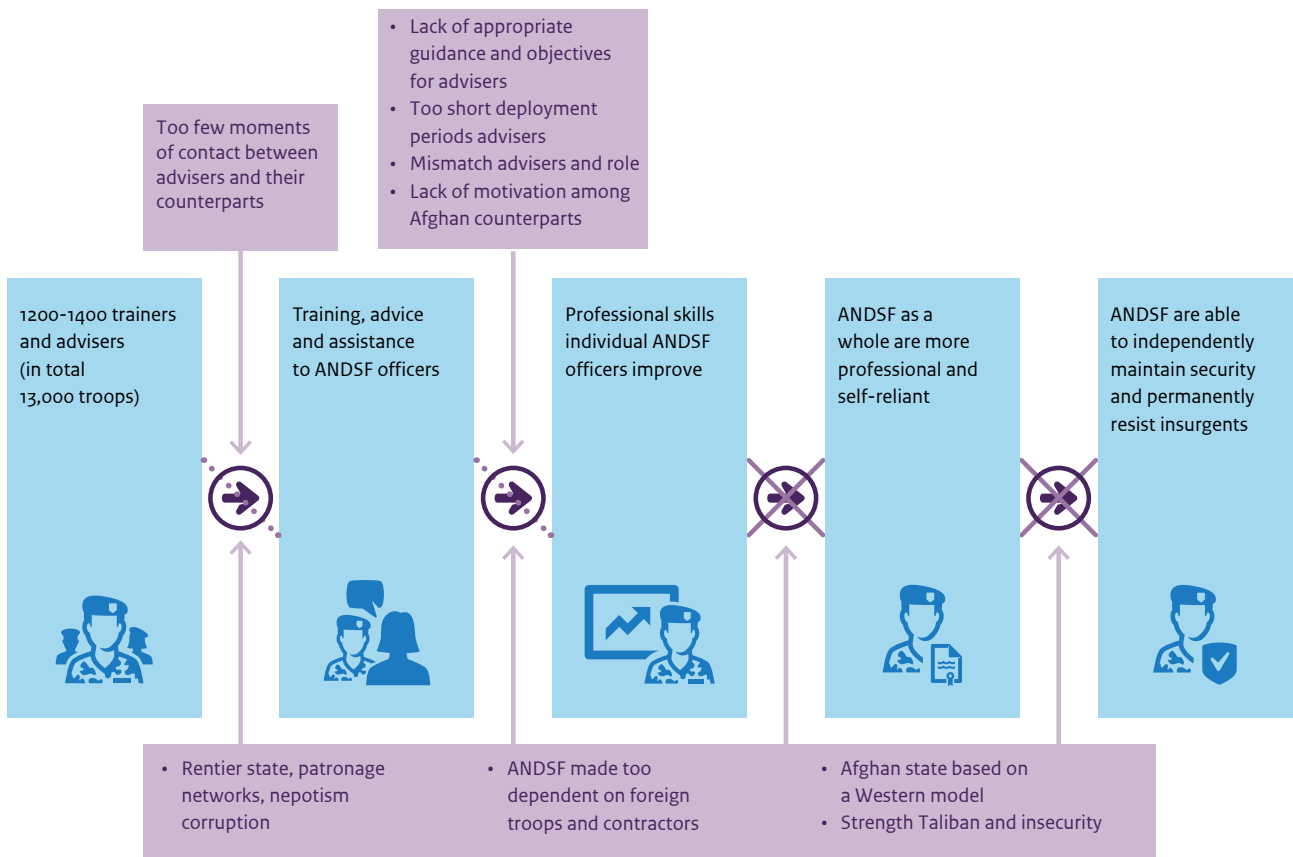


Figure 6: Factors that affected the achievement of the objectives of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM

Given the factors that have been mentioned, it was unrealistic that the mission objectives would be achieved with the resources and methods used. Many of these factors were known before RSM started in 2014. However, there was also no other solution that had sufficient support among NATO allies. NATO allies wanted to leave Afghanistan, and RSM was, on paper, a way to be able to wind down the international military presence. In the Netherlands, the decision to participate in RSM did not involve critical consideration of whether the mission plan was realistic. Within the ministries involved, the main consideration was the extent to which the Netherlands could deliver what Germany asked for (see section 2.2), and the idea was that the contribution followed logically from previous Dutch deployments in Afghanistan, and that it was in line with the desires to cooperate with Germany and to show allied solidarity. The question of to which extent it could actually be expected that RSM would achieve its objectives played a secondary role in the decision to contribute.^{ccvii}



5 Conclusions and lessons to be learned

5.1 Conclusions

The central questions of this evaluation were as follows: To what extent were the objectives of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support achieved, how can this be explained, and what lessons can be learned for future Dutch mission contributions?

The main objective of RSM was not achieved after the unilateral US withdrawal.

The objective of RSM, and of the Dutch contribution to it, was to create a professional and self-reliant Afghan security apparatus that would be able, also in the long run, to maintain security and offer resistance to the Taliban and other insurgents. The Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 showed that this objective was not achieved. The immediate reason for this was the unilateral decision by the United States to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan, even though it was known that the ANDSF were not yet capable of providing security on their own.

During the mission, RSM was also not on track to achieve its objectives.

Even during the mission, RSM was not on track to achieve its objectives. The Taliban gained control of more and more territory during the entire period of the mission, from 2015 to 2021, and there is no evidence that the self-reliance or professionalism of the Afghan armed forces and police improved structurally during that period. Throughout the mission, the ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors—that is, both for direct military assistance in fighting the Taliban, and for help in operating as armed forces and police themselves. Major problems remained with key roles within the ANDSF, such as supply, command and control, and logistics. In addition, the ANDSF continued to suffer from widespread corruption, high turnover, and heavy casualties, as well as poor morale and low combat readiness on the part of troops.

The Netherlands contributed to a limited extent to the professionalisation of individual ANDSF officers, but not to structural improvements in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.

The Netherlands was able to make only a limited contribution to meeting RSM objectives. During the mission, small steps were taken by Dutch advisers in helping to improve the professional skills of individual officers. However, these steps did not lead to any structural progress in the self-reliance of the ANDSF.

Most progress in this regard was observed in the training of ATF-888 by German and Dutch special units, starting in 2018. This was partly because they were training an entire unit instead of advising individual officers. Another reason was that they trained and supervised more intensively, with more contact moments, with a clearer objective and according to a clearer plan; and that they actually accompanied people in operations. However, it is impossible to say whether this would ultimately have led to the sustained independent (proper) functioning of the unit if the Taliban had not taken power in 2021. In addition, training the special units under RSM was not enough to ensure the self-reliance of the ANDSF as a whole.

54 | Many factors hampered the effectiveness of (the Dutch contribution to) RSM.

Several factors hampered the effectiveness of both the Dutch contribution to RSM and that of other countries: there was a lack of specific objectives for the advisers and their counterparts; a lack of guidance and monitoring of progress on the part of NATO, too few moments of contact between advisers and their counterparts, too-rapid rotations of advisers, and a lack of motivation among many Afghan counterparts. The effectiveness of the Dutch contribution was also limited by the fact that the Dutch advisers were often linked to Afghan police officers, which was given lower priority in RSM than the Afghan army.

In addition to the aforementioned problems with mission design and execution, there were broader factors that limited the effectiveness of RSM and thus the effectiveness of the Dutch contribution to it. Starting in 2001, the international coalition tried to build an Afghan state based on a Western model that did not fit the Afghan reality—a state over which both the population and government officials felt limited ownership. The large influx of foreign money created a rentier state that fostered patronage networks, nepotism, and large-scale corruption. The poor security situation made it especially difficult to build a security apparatus, because soldiers and police officers were needed to fight the Taliban even as they were still being trained. The Afghan security apparatus was equipped with modern, maintenance-intensive weapons systems by the US in particular, with the result that the ANDSF remained dependent on foreign troops and contractors who had specialist knowledge.

Many of these factors were also known before RSM started, and they made it unlikely that RSM and the Dutch contribution to it would, with the resources and methods used, achieve the objectives that had been set. However, in the Cabinet decision to contribute, the question of the extent to which RSM could actually be expected to achieve its objectives played a role that was secondary to the desire to show allied solidarity and to cooperate with Germany. In addition, the mission was seen as relatively safe, limited in scope and with little political risk. Moreover, the NATO allies wanted to wind down their military presence in Afghanistan, and there was no alternative to RSM for which there was sufficient support within NATO.

The progress of the mission was presented too positively by both NATO and the Netherlands.

Within NATO, during the mission, the progress achieved in strengthening the ANDSF and the developments in the security situation in Afghanistan were presented more positively than was warranted by the facts. This was the case in reports from the field to NATO headquarters and in reports by NATO to participating countries and the outside world. It was also the case in reports from the Cabinet to the House of Representatives, mainly in the years of the mission up to 2020. A collective wishful thinking emerged in which staff within the NATO organisation and in participating countries stuck to the same positive narrative even though the evidence did not support this, and in which they did not pay enough heed to the signs that not all was well. These negative signals came from security services (including the MIVD), SIGAR, and scholars and journalists, among others.

Dutch grounds for participation in RSM were too ambitious and were insufficiently substantiated.

As justification for its decision to participate in the mission, the Cabinet formulated a number of ‘grounds for participation’: allied solidarity; countering migration; preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism; and consolidating economic growth, human rights, and the rule of law in Afghanistan. With the exception of allied solidarity, the grounds for participating were very diverse and ambitious, given the relatively small contribution to the mission: 100-160 people at a time. They were also based on assumptions about the effects of the mission contribution—assumptions that were not substantiated by the Cabinet and that were, in some cases, questionable. This type of ‘grounds for participation’ makes it difficult for the Cabinet to account for the extent to which a mission deployment actually contributes to the ambitions to which the deployment is supposed to contribute.

5.2 Lessons to be learned

What lessons for the Cabinet can be drawn for future Dutch mission contributions?

The attempt by RSM to strengthen the Afghan security apparatus was not effective.

The attempt to strengthen the Afghan security apparatus structurally through RSM did not work. There is also evidence that security sector reform often does not work in fragile states where basic conditions such as security, ownership, and political capacity are not in place.^{ccviii} From this, the following lessons can be drawn:

- 1a. *Be realistic about what training and advisory missions can achieve when deciding whether to participate, or keep participating, in international missions and when formulating, for any Dutch mission contribution, its objectives, the expectations for it, and the grounds for it.*
- 1b. *In applying the assessment framework for the deployment of military units,^{ccix} be clear about the extent to which it can be expected that the objectives of the mission to which the Netherlands is contributing will be achieved given the resources available. That would fit, for instance, within the passages on feasibility and risk in the assessment framework.*

Deployments of six months are too short.

Deployment periods of six months are not sufficient for advisory activities where it is important to build a good working relationship with the counterpart and for the adviser to get to know the local context. Also, short deployment periods make it difficult to monitor progress or the lack of it. Previous evaluations by IOB, of the Dutch police-training mission in Kunduz and the Dutch contribution to MINUSMA, had noted similar problems.^{ccx} Other studies also made similar observations.^{ccxi} An important lesson, then, is:

2. *Do not send out individual advisors or trainers for one-off periods of six months in missions where building a good working relationship and monitoring progress over the long term are important.*

In practice, there are obstacles to sending military advisers or trainers for extended periods, including the burden that long deployment periods place on advisers and their family members who remain behind in the Netherlands. However, there are solutions to these challenges. One possibility is that a few Dutch advisers or trainers are paired with the same counterpart for multiple placements over an extended period of several years. Alternatively, a Dutch unit could be attached to a specific battalion or brigade. Even if the individuals offering training or advice change, if the unit remains the same, this could make it easier to ensure continuity.^{ccxii}

A lack of specific objectives and direction for advisers on the part of NATO.

On NATO's part, there was a lack of concrete objectives for the advisers vis-à-vis their Afghan partners, and a lack of consistent direction for the many advisers from different countries.

3. *In the context of any comparable training missions in the future, urge NATO to set concrete objectives and give specific guidance for the trainers and advisers who are to be deployed.*

Lack of information on the progress of the mission, and overly positive reporting.

It is important that the Cabinet is transparent to the House of Representatives and to Dutch society about the progress of missions. For this, it is also important for the Netherlands to be well informed by organisations to which it contributes, such as NATO.

- 4a. *Urge NATO to properly monitor and transparently report on missions.*
- 4b. *Report both positive and negative issues in a transparent manner: from the field to ministries and from ministries to the House of Representatives.*

The fact that this did not happen in RSM was not unique: it was also noted in evaluations of the Dutch contributions to the police-training mission in Kunduz and to the MINUSMA mission.^{ccxiii} All three evaluations found incentives within international missions and within the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs for staff at various levels of the organisations to present issues too positively and to downplay negative signals. Given the existence of this organisational culture:

- 4c. *Introduce independent mid-term reviews or independent monitoring of Dutch mission contributions.*

Except in situations where the cost and duration of independent mid-term reviews or monitoring are disproportionate to the cost and duration of the mission itself. This will often be the case, for example, in missions where one or a few people are placed in a range of different positions, and in missions lasting less than two years.

Grounds for participation of the Dutch mission contribution.

The Cabinet did not formulate its own goals for the Dutch contribution to RSM, but it did formulate 'grounds for participation' in the mission. Many of the stated grounds for participation were not well substantiated or shown to be plausible, and were very ambitious compared to the relatively limited mission contribution. A similar observation was made in the evaluation of the Dutch contribution to MINUSMA.^{ccxiv} This type of grounds for participation makes it difficult for the Cabinet to account for the extent to which a mission deployment actually contributes to the ambitions it has set out to the House of Representatives as reasons for participating in the mission.

- 5a. *It can be appropriate for the Cabinet to set out the broader vision towards a country in letters to the House of Representatives about contributions to a mission. But if 'grounds for participation' are formulated as objectives of a mission contribution, it should be ensured that they are well substantiated, and that the only grounds that are mentioned are those that can reasonably be shown to have a causal relationship with the mission contribution.*
- 5b. *Be clear about what specific results are expected from the Dutch contribution to a mission: the objectives of the contribution should be precisely formulated, should preferably be measurable, and should be realistic given the available resources and the context of the mission.*

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Abbreviations

AAF	Afghan Air Force
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
ASSF	Afghan Special Security Forces
ATF-888	Afghan Territorial Force 888
EUPOL	European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan
FOC	Fully operationally capable
GCPSU	General Command of Police Special Units
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (<i>Directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie</i>)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	(Directorate for) Inter-Services Intelligence
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
IT	Information technology
KMar	Royal Military Police (<i>Koninklijke Marechaussee</i>)
MAAR	Monthly ANDSF Assessment Report
MIVD	Military Intelligence and Security Service (<i>Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst</i>)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCTV	National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (<i>Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid</i>)
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NSE	National support element
NSOCC-A	NATO Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OFS	Operation Freedom’s Sentinel
PIAT	Police Institutional Advisory Team
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
RASR	Regional ANSF Status Report
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SNR	Senior National Representative
SOAT	Special Operations Advisory Team
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TAA	Train, Advise and Assist
TAA+A	Train, Advise, Assist and Accompany
TAAC	Train Advise Assist Command
TAAC – N	Train Advise Assist Command – North
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UN	United Nations
US	United States

End notes

- i NATO, 'Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan' (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm).
- ii See the Parliamentary Letter [Kamerbrief] on the operation of the Article 100 procedure and the Review Framework [Toetsingskader], 22 January 2014 Parliamentary Paper [Kamerstuk] 29521, no. 226; and Parliamentary letter on Parliament's involvement in the deployment of military units, 13 July 2001, p. 5 (Parliamentary Paper 23591, no. 7).
- iii Parliamentary letter on coherent Dutch engagement in collective defence and in missions and operations to promote the international rule of law, 2022–2025, Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 446, pp. 2–3.
- iv Ministry of Defence, 'Nederland helpt Britten bij training Oekraïense militairen', 15 July 2022 (www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/07/15/nederland-helpt-britten-bij-training-oekraïense-militairen), and Ministry of Defence, 'Defensie levert 230 militairen voor EU-training Oekraïne', 20 February 2023 (www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/02/20/defensie-levert-230-militairen-voor-eu-training-oekraïne).
- v Parliamentary letter on coherent Dutch engagement in collective defence and in missions and operations to promote the international rule of law, 2022–2025, Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 446, pp. 2–3.
- vi Article 100 letter, 1 September 2014 (Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 254) (citation translated from Dutch).
- vii Article 100 letter, 1 September 2014 (Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 254).
- viii Article 100 letter 1 September 2014 (Parliamentary Paper 29521, no. 254), pp. 3–4; Article 100 letter mission extension, 11 September 2017 (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 611), pp. 1–2; Article 100 letter mission extension, 15 June 2018 (Parliamentary Paper 27925, no. 630), p. 1.
- ix NATO, 'Collective Defence and Article 5' (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm).
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- xi Peceny, M. and Bosin, Y., 'Winning with warlords in Afghanistan', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 4 (2011): 603–618; Giustozzi, A. (2009), 'Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan', London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, p. 88. Barfield, T. (2010), 'Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History', Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 283.
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