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“Fighting” versus “Reconstructing”. Framing the Dutch mission in Afghanistan

George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf

Introduction

From 2006 to 2010, the Netherlands was the lead nation in the Afghan province of Uruzgan. During that period, the Netherlands made a substantial contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with thousands of military and civilian personnel. Initially, a force of 1200 was to be sent to southern Afghanistan, a figure that grew to almost 2000 in 2008 (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 330). The first period, which was due to expire in the year 2008, was extended to 2010. However, on 20 February 2010, the Dutch coalition government headed by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende collapsed after a conflict over the extension of the Dutch mission in Afghanistan. Balkenende’s center-right Christian Democrats wanted to agree to a NATO request to extend the Dutch presence in Afghanistan, whereas the Labor Party bitterly opposed it (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 328).

In this chapter, we offer a contribution to the growing literature on strategic narratives in analyzing the importance of a unified “frame production.” We will illustrate how contradicting, fragmented, and politicized frames exert a disruptive force on both the creation and reception of official strategic narratives. The case of the Netherlands is particularly interesting because it provides a better understanding of how strategic narratives, media frames, and public understanding (and support) are intertwined. It will become clear that the failure to produce a coherent and compelling strategic narrative straightaway contributed to the fragmentation of media frames explaining the mission to the public. A plethora of conflicting and overlapping media frames greatly affected public understanding and was one of the key elements in undermining public support for the mission.

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1 The authors like to express their thanks to The authors like to express their thanks to Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, Fabrizio Coticchia, Karina Dimitriu, John Kok, Jens Ringsmose for their help and input.
2 A more elaborate analysis of the counternarrative and elite responsiveness will be published in Foreign Policy Analysis, by the same authors (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2014).
This chapter is divided in two parts. First, we present a qualitative discussion of the aspects of the strategic narratives present in the Dutch political and public discourse, zooming in especially on the first key element, the formulation of a clear and compelling mission purpose. Secondly, we will tease out the presentation of the military mission in simplified frameworks in the Dutch national media. We will flesh out the different frames, noting how they collided, reinforced each other, and fluctuated during the years of deployment. How does the lack of such a compelling narrative matter in the “battle of ideas” that a government is waging at the home front? Elsewhere, we argued that the lack of public support might well be tied to the absence of an effective strategic narrative, combined with the emergence of strong and compelling counternarratives (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2014); here, we will further elaborate on this line of reasoning and pay greater attention to the salience of framing the mission as cornerstone to a successful strategic narrative.

The strategic narrative under scrutiny: a qualitative assessment

Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) and Jakobsen and Ringsmose (chapter 8) contend that given similar challenges, similar threats, and similar international obligations, countries might arrive at totally different strategic narratives, and at greatly diverging political decisions regarding military deployment. This factual divergence of national positions in an identical international context demands further attention. Indeed, strong narratives might mitigate and deflect the negative impact of casualties and costs on public support for a mission, whereas weak narratives further undermine the public’s willingness to continue in this fashion.

Elsewhere, we demonstrate that the relative weight of strategic narratives as measured against the counternarratives presented by the opposition and in the media – which we indicate as “narrative dominance” – constitute the independent variable that shaped Dutch public opinion. Not the strategic narrative, but the counternarrative of the “combat mission disguised as reconstruction mission” came to dominate the national debates. Hence, not strategic narratives as such, but their relative dominance, as calculated with respect to counternarratives present, are one of the key elements explaining the waxing and waning of public support for a given mission (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2014).

Combining a number of recent studies on strategic narratives, some aspects can be identified that characterize a narrative as “strong,” and thereby possibly more effective and able to dominate counternarratives (Freedman 2006; Antoniades, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon 2010; Roselle 2010; Voogd and Vos 2010; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). Strong strategic narratives articulate a 1) clear, realistic, and compelling mission purpose; 2) they have to be imbued with legitimacy; 3) hold
out a realistic prospect of success; 4) are presented in a consistent fashion; and 5) fit within an overall strategic communication plan. We will now project these aspects on the Dutch strategic narrative(s) as formulated by the Dutch government.3

1. Framing the war: clear and compelling mission purpose?

After the war in Afghanistan commenced in October 2001, the Netherlands contributed to various missions. After the 9/11 attacks, according to poll results of Gallup International, three fourths of the Dutch public supported the American attack on Afghanistan. Moreover, the Dutch public also expressed its support for participation of Dutch troops therein (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Inoguchi 2005). When Dutch forces were actually deployed to Afghanistan as of December 2001, support remained stable throughout the next couple of years. However, from 2002/3 onwards, the U.S. “War on Terror” and the war in Iraq started to occasion serious controversy within Dutch society and its parliament.

The political debate about the Dutch government’s decision to deploy a Special Forces Task Group in 2005–2006 to the southeastern border of Afghanistan as part of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was a forerunner to subsequent debates about the mission to Uruzgan. From the beginning, rumors and misgivings about War on Terror-abuses by US forces influenced the debate and course of action regarding the Dutch contribution to ISAF that commenced in 2006 (Dimitriu 2013). Within this politicized context, NATO requested the Dutch government to contribute to the expansion of the ISAF mission to the province of Uruzgan in the southern region of Afghanistan early in 2005. The significance of this rather isolated area, with a population of 395,000 (mainly Pashtun), was mainly owing to the fact that it produced many Taliban leaders and that President Karzai picked the place to start his quest for power in late 2001.

In December 2005, just before the government was about to decide on the deployment, Boris Dittrich (leader of the political party Democrats 66) announced that his party (which was part of the Dutch coalition government at the time) would object to the decision to contribute to ISAF. His statement put the two D66 ministers in the Cabinet in an impossible position. They could not repudiate their party’s position without severely compromising the government. Only after lengthy negotiations did the parliamentary D66 faction agree to accept a Cabinet statement (a so-called “Article 100’ letter”) regarding its “intention” (rather than the “decision”) to create a military

3 The following part, where we flesh out the five aspects of the Dutch strategic narrative overlaps with our article in Foreign Policy Analysis. The framing part, the analysis, and the conclusion are novel (2014).
mission to Uruzgan (Hazelbag, 2009). When this Letter was presented to parliament on 22 December 2005, the seed of unrest regarding the meaning and implications of the stated “intention” was sown (“Woordenspel Afghanistan” 2006). Although two other opposition parties raised serious objections, a small majority eventually supported the decision. Coalition party D66 consented, but remained internally divided over the issue. On 2 February 2006 the Second Chamber ratified the decision to deploy Dutch soldiers under the flag of the Task Force Uruzgan (TFU). A few months later, the first Dutch troops of the Deployment Task Force (DTF) went to Uruzgan to prepare for the arrival of the main force that commenced its tasks on the first of August 2006.

The parliamentary decision was a brittle one. Most importantly, it still lacked a clear and compelling mission purpose, or an overall strategic communication plan. In their Article 100 Letter, the ministers involved, Henk Kamp (Defense), Ben Bot (Foreign Affairs), and Agnes van Ardenne (Development Cooperation), penned the basic elements of the strategic narrative: “The stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan [...] is crucially important for promoting international order and for the fight against the international terrorism that also threatens Europe. In view of that importance the government considers the risks [of the mission] acceptable” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 193).

The mission’s purpose was thus formulated as a loose combination of aspects: it was to bring stability, security, and reconstruction to the region by increasing the local support for the Afghan authorities and by eroding support for the Taliban and affiliated groups as pre-conditions for lasting development. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Development Cooperation, and Defense were realistic about the bad security situation. Dutch forces “need to take the possibility of attacks [of the insurgency] into account – while on patrol, during the logistical transport of goods in the air and on the ground, and on the bases of the ISAF units. Therefore, I cannot exclude the possibility that Dutch soldiers will fall victim during those operations” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 193).

This formula was broad enough to be amenable to all kinds of shifting interpretations. According to the Prime Minister, the Uruzgan mission resulted from “the conviction that the international community should not leave Afghanistan on its own” (NOVA 2005), indicating that the priority was with the Afghans in their battle against the Taliban. For the Minister of Defense, Henk Kamp, the mission’s purpose mirrored the Dutch constitutional obligation to “contribute to more peace and security in the world” (NOVA 2005). But even before the mission had started, Kamp would add other dimensions to the strategic narrative. A couple of months later, Kamp explicated the overarching purpose of the mission by pointing to the necessity of fighting international terrorism, expressing loyalty to NATO, and advancing the UN’s goals. During still other interviews he remarked that the
Netherlands was there for the sake of the Afghan people, to help the international coalition, and to contribute to global security (NOVA 2005; 2006a; 2006b).

In short, the strategic narrative subsumed a series of conflicting political intentions and inclinations. Ministers consequently juggled with the four overarching goals mentioned above: Sometimes they stressed the necessity to fight terrorism as part of the global war against international terrorism. Sometimes they focused more on domestic security (fighting terrorists in Afghanistan to prevent them from coming to the Netherlands) or on loyalty to NATO. On other occasions, ministers defended the mission with humanitarian arguments, explaining that it would make life better for the Afghans (Ministry of Defense 2006a; Klep 2011, 34, 126). Below, we will further elaborate upon this aspect of strategic narratives, and demonstrate how the elite’s unwillingness or inability to craft a single storyline led to a multiplicity of arguments and “frames,” thereby undermining the possibility of convincing the public and mobilizing political support for the mission (Coticchia and De Simone, 2014).

2. **Legitimacy**

The lack of a clearly formulated mission statement had serious consequences for the public and political sense of the mission’s legitimacy. Literature has demonstrated the crucial role of a narrative in “winning the legitimacy of domestic public opinion” (Dommersnes, 2011: 8). Legitimation is understood as a process of normative evaluation from which the “ascribed quality of legitimacy” emerges (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 112; Parkinson 2003, 184). Within the discourse on military missions, three strands of legitimacy can be discerned: the international legality of the mission, the perceived legitimacy of the process of national decision making, and the perceived justness and necessity of the intervention. For the Dutch public and in parliamentary discourse, international legitimacy and legality were the most important aspects. Everts (2008) argues that since the 1990s these two elements count as preconditions for garnering public support for any military mission. Prior to the intervention in Iraq, for example, the level of public support was closely connected to the question of whether the US would achieve UN approval for its “pre-emptive strike” (Everts 2008). The strategic narrative regarding the TFU thus wisely included explicit references to the international agreements, conferences, commitments, and legal principles provided by the UN and NATO.

However, the strategic narrative failed to provide compelling arguments to underscore the procedural legitimacy of the domestic decision making process. Although Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende and Defense Minister Henk Kamp repeatedly claimed that they arrived at a thorough and
deliberate decision based on in-depth analyses and military advice, their credibility was already low from the get-go. Coalition party D66 together with some parties in the opposition used the Article 100 procedure to assert their objections to both the deployment decision as such and the alleged obfuscated decision making process. They criticized the fact that the official announcement of the government’s investigation into the possibilities of a military mission in southern Afghanistan in 2005 had been tucked away in a report on a totally different subject (Hazelbag 2009). Accusations of non-transparency and even deception kept recurring. Opposition parties, commentators, and journalists kept repeating the argument that the government had by-passed correct procedures, had held back information pointing to the military risks, and had kept secret the requests from NATO and coalition forces to step up and prolong the TFU (Hofland 2010).

Doubts about the legitimacy of the mission’s purpose – the third strand in the legitimacy debate – were also present at the start of the debate. The ISAF mission in Uruzgan was launched against the background of recurrent revelations about human rights abuses in Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo Bay. Commentators questioned how the Dutch armed forces could be so sure that similar incidents would not occur under their auspices. TFU’s legitimacy was further tainted by its proximity to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 201). Opposition leaders, notably Jan Marijnissen (Socialist Party), contended that the Netherlands allowed itself to be treated as a stooge of the US. The legitimacy argument thus reinvigorated the “fight or reconstruct”-debate and eroded the government’s strategic narrative. An opinion poll of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (2007) indicated that 86 percent of the Dutch citizens interviewed supported reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, while only 46 percent supported combat missions in that country.

3.  Prospect of success

Closely related to formulating clear and compelling mission purposes and soliciting legitimacy is the importance of depicting a realistic prospect for success. Without clearly formulated policy goals at the start, it is quite cumbersome to design them once the mission is underway. Be that as it may, at no point during the first years of the mission did the government present explicit examples of measured success to the public. Members of the political elite, ministers, and military commanders kept stating that TFU had made “improvements,” but that its success was very hard to quantify. Minister Kamp stated, for example, that only subsequent to the mission’s completion “visual results could be an improvement of the quality of provincial governance, better functioning police forces, and a more effective Afghan National Army” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 201).
Some attempts to formulate a prospect of success were made, however. For example, directly after the mission deployed in August 2006, TFU-commanders introduced the so-called “oil stain approach” or “ink spot approach” to the Dutch public at home, to describe the way their troops went about securing the region (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 226). This military frame became a temporally catchphrase: the ink spot could be mapped, geographically, it could be presented on maps and charts on television, and any increases and extensions or even fusions of secured “ink spots” in Uruzgan could be easily demonstrated. However, the metaphor soon lost its persuasive power, since it was merely a tactical, military argument rather than a full-fledged policy goal.

Next, at the end of 2006, a rather impressionistic approach to assessing success was introduced when the Dutch government started using the so-called “3D approach,” referring to the comprehensive combination of Defense, Diplomacy, and Development (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 247). While the terminology was already being used by other countries (in Canada, the US and UK), the Dutch government tended to present the “3D approach” as specifically Dutch (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 279). Success was now re-framed: rather than pointing to progress on the battlefield, it was to be found in the fact that the Dutch counterinsurgency approach made an impression on other ISAF-countries, including the US, and that the old adage of the Netherlands as a “pilot country” on the international diplomatic scene was being revitalized through this sophisticated and novel approach in Uruzgan. In the media, some pointed out that Dutch soldiers used bicycles and carried their guns on their backs, or even walked the alleyways and streets in Uruzgan; as compared to the Americans who only showed themselves in heavily armored vehicles, with weapons ready, and who spoke with guns rather than by having tea with Afghan elders. Other rather successful but incidental efforts to narrate successes achieved in Afghanistan pointed to the fact that “Tarin Kowt’s streets were lit again at night.”

The 3D concept, and the above mentioned illustrations, certainly had some communicative impact. However, these presentations of the mission still did not solve the underlying problem – the lack of a clear strategic narrative or prospect of measurable success. The 3D concept was as vague and open for multiple interpretations as the original mission statement had been (Van der Lijn 2011). The Advisory Council for International Affairs (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken - AIV) therefore concluded that the government was still obfuscating a clear view on the purported end state of the mission (AIV 2009; Dimitriu et al. 2010), and other than haphazardly trying to infuse some optimism in the public’s spirit failed to create sustainable support.
4. The absence or presence of strong counternarratives

Arguably the most important endogenous factor eroding popular support was the clatter caused by counternarratives to the mission that were increasingly evident in the media. As scholars have argued before, a highly relevant component for creating and sustaining public support for the use of force is elite consensus. The media’s reaction to policy decisions is dependent on the level of agreement among politicians (Entman 2007; Baum and Groehling 2010). The greater the dissent, the more likely that the media will start inscribing these political dissenting voices, i.e., counternarratives, into their dichotomous media frames.

Indeed, immediately after the reception of the Article 100 Letter in Parliament, in December 2005, political polarization about the nature of the mission erupted – and was reinforced and dramatized in the media. The opposition – including the socialist SP and left-liberal GroenLinks parties – together with members of the governing D66-party fired their rounds on 2 February 2006 by claiming that Task Force Uruzgan would be a “combat mission” and a “war operation” rather than the supposed “reconstruction mission” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 207). The dichotomy that was used initially to indicate the differences between OEF and ISAF was now used to frame the Dutch deployment to Uruzgan. These descriptors were soon taken up by other opposition parties as well (such as the socialist party and Geert Wilders’ far right party), thereby introducing the counternarrative of the “combat mission deliberately disguised as reconstruction mission” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 79, 222).

The progressive parties’ major argument for criticizing TFU as a “combat mission in disguise” was provided by the threat of “mission creep” and an overlap with the American military’s Operation Enduring Freedom. This proximity could impinge on the TFU’s reconstruction activities, which – in their view – lay at the heart of the mission’s purpose. Minister Ben Bot (Foreign Affairs) and Minister Eimert van Middelkoop (Defense) tried to turn the tide by pointing out that such a simple dichotomy failed to do justice to the reality on the ground (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 222). The armed forces themselves tried to avoid this dichotomous scheme as well, by pointing out that their operations served multiple ends (Koelé 2006; Dam and De Vreij 2006; Van Griensven 2007). But the harm was already done; the fighting/reconstructing dichotomy was there to stay, both in parliament and in the media (Van Reijn 2007).

5. Strategic communication plan
Although the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Development Cooperation, and Defense were aware of the importance of public support, they did not draft a strategic communication plan nor did they explicitly deploy a strategic narrative. No central direction or coordination of the communication policy existed. After Parliament approved the mission in February 2006, the central government lost interest in maintaining political and public support for the mission and left it to the Ministry of Defense to pick up on the PR front.

As a result, as soon as the opposition started to sow doubt as to the purpose and success of the mission, the government was on the defensive. The Ministry of Defense (until 2008 acting on its own behalf, rather than operating jointly with the other ministers involved) kept rehearsing the argument that the complex operations in Afghanistan could not be simplified to a “combat mission” or a “reconstruction mission.” In fact, the Ministry of Defense never tried to mitigate or tone down the mission’s true risks or military efforts. However, compared to the opposition and media frame of the “reconstruction mission gone awry,” the strategic narrative, as put forward in the Article 100 Letter, lacked robustness, was not supported by other ministers, and was not media savvy enough.

Framing the mission

1. Strategic narratives and framing

Among these five key aspects for crafting strategic narratives, the first element, framing a clear and compelling mission purpose, functions as a cornerstone upholding the other four. Elsewhere, we take a closer look at the fourth element, the absence or presence of counternarratives (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2014); here we aim to focus more on the ways a military mission and its purpose are “framed.” The conceptual framework of strategic narrative goes well beyond a concept of framing. As Miskimmon et al. explain in this volume and elsewhere, “the structure of narratives involves a focus on temporality and space” (chapter 4; 2012). Whereas framing has a static connotation, narratives are imbued with temporality; they emphasize the time-line trajectory of a certain operation or intervention that is crucial to decision making and soliciting public support. The precise relationship between strategic narratives and framing is an elusive one, albeit incredibly important. Through strategic narratives, political elites give meaning to events by articulating the intended political objectives (Antoniades et al. 2010). While frames are conceived as “snapshots of an issue in a given moment,” as short semantic vignettes, narratives encompass the whole story through time and space. When strategic narratives are the frameworks, frames may be considered the bricks for building these narratives (Coticchia and De Simone, 2014).
A note here, explaining the distinction between narratives and framing or spin: According to Douglas (2008), narratives are “forward-looking conceptual frameworks for explaining and interpreting events yet to come.” The narrative follows a self-referential logic, not intended to frame an event for temporary advantage (Douglas 2008, 4; Miskimmon et al. 2012). A spin or propaganda effort serves a specific, short term political purpose; they do not first of all aim to establish causal relations between intentions, means, ways, and results, as proper strategic narratives do on a much larger timescale. According to Coticchia, “narratives go beyond just ‘framing an issue’; they elaborate plots, connecting phenomena around some causal transformation” (Coticchia and De Simone 2014; see also Antoniades et al. 2010, 4).

2. **Defining the media frames**

In line with Cotichhia and De Simone’s work on framing the war in Italy (2014), we have tentatively identified the main conceptual frameworks in which the mission’s events, aims, and actors were cast. Based on our qualitative assessment of the decision making process presented above and elsewhere (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2014, 2010), we were able to pinpoint a vocabulary of frames that were used to either label the mission’s nature, its purpose, its operational activities, or its policy context. Through content analysis (Weber, 1990; see also Coticchia and De Simone 2014) and a close reading of government speeches, parliamentary debates, and media coverage, we found a series of metaphors, words, and phrases that kept returning in the declarations and discussions and that were accepted as standing explanations for the mission’s purpose.

Over the years, newspapers portrayed the purpose of the mission in various ways – alternately highlighting humanitarian aspects, international loyalties, and security issues. We analyzed a dataset composed of 12,521 newspaper clippings drawn from all of the national newspaper reports regarding the TFU between December 2005 and December 2010. We first searched the dataset for the keywords “Uruzgan” OR “Oeroezgan” per month. We then launched a second search operation on the thus produced body of texts by using clusters of defining terms (categories) to scrutinize the texts. These categories amounted to six different “media frames”; each being a simplified and reiterated representation and interpretation, in which the military mission was cast and that served as the “building blocks” for the strategic narratives regarding the use of force. We categorized the results per month, in total, per number of newspaper hits, and per frame. We calculated the partial number of one specific frame per 100 newspaper articles per month, while accepting that more than one frame could be identified in a single article.
Each of these frames consisted of a different mix of military, civilian, and/or humanitarian elements regarding the Dutch deployment in Uruzgan. The frameworks identified were:

1. Dutch soldiers are conducting an “ink spot” approach to securing the region. This term originates from military jargon, mentioned by the first TFU commander, Colonel Theo Vleugels, in June 2006 before the mission even started. The Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces, General Dick Berlijn, started to refer to the ink spot (sometimes oil stain or oil spot) in August 2006. Parliamentary representatives and politicians appropriated the term in the fall of 2006 (Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2010).

2. The Foreign Ministry introduced the “3D” approach in the public domain in autumn 2006, supported by the Defense Ministry and the Ministry of Development and Cooperation (Official Parliamentary Reports 237, 2006; “Bij vechten hoort ook helpen” 2006). According to this approach, the deployment serves the triple aim of strengthening, providing, and securing “Defense, Development, and Diplomacy.”

3. From the onset of the operations the term “reconstruction mission” was introduced and allegedly favored by the government in a constructed juxtaposition to “combat mission.” The latter was put forward by oppositional parties, and immediately adopted in the media, most frequently in combination with the word “fighting.”

4. The “Article 100” approach (also referred to as “official” or “government frame”) was introduced by the government, in an official statement to the parliament. In this “Article 100-letter” (see above), the mission was described as a hybrid, combining the quest for stability, security, good governance, and reconstruction. Individual cabinet members emphasized different aspects, further obfuscating the already complex character of this frame.

5. An elusive, so-called, Dutch Approach, with strong (positive) historical reminiscences, conjuring up an exceptional Dutch handling of security matters through reason, negotiation, and a reluctance to deploy all out force, was introduced early in the history of the mission as well (Moelker 2009). The concept originated from the domestic counterterrorism debates in the 1970s, was rejuvenated after Dutch participation in the Stabilization Force Iraq (2003–2005), and often employed, even by internationally prominent politicians, in close connection to the “3D”-approach – as did US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton when trying to persuade the Dutch government to prolong the Dutch presence in Uruzgan in 2009 (Brocades Zaalberg 2013).

4 Hillary Clinton stated: “Dutch soldiers and civilians have done excellent work. . . . In fact, the Dutch ‘3D’ approach – defense, diplomacy, and development pursued simultaneously – . . . is a model for our own efforts and the future efforts in Afghanistan” (Solomon, 2009).
6. Pundits, experts, and academics inserted the notion of the mission as a “counterinsurgency approach” into the debate. This notion was also accepted and adopted, but only by a small group of journalists and experts (Brocades Zaalberg 2007; 2008).

This approach produced the following chart. We plotted the number of frames per 100 newspaper articles in order to make the table evenly distributed, as some months saw the appearance of 770 news reports on Uruzgan, while others counted only 98.

![Graph showing the relative weight of the six media frames, 2006–2010, per 100 newspaper articles per month.](image)

**Figure 1.** Relative weight of the six media frames, 2006–2010, per 100 newspaper articles per month.

3. **Analyzing the peaks and troughs**

A frame, or set of connected terms and synonyms producing a distinct framework, consists of a simplified version of aim, nature, actor, and status of the mission. The frames above do all that, but establish rather different causal relations and situation descriptions, from which conflicting conclusions as to the legitimacy, success, or overall strategy of the mission can be derived. The counterinsurgency frame presupposed, for example, a purpose of catching and neutralizing insurgents, whereas a reconstruction mission implies an aim directed at rebuilding houses and restoring public order, safety, and security.

Therefore, what is evident first and foremost from the graph above (figure 1) is the fact that the presentation of the Uruzgan mission in the media suffered from severe fluctuations and the instability of terms and their meanings. The ink spot frame for example, emerged as a popular media
frame shortly after the TFU deployed, but in 2008 its appearance decreased. At the same time, and corresponding with increased usage in official parliamentary reports by all three involved ministries in late 2008, the 3D frame gained popularity. Within virtually all analysed periods, at least four (but often more) different frames were presented in the media, in varying constellations, whereas neither of these frames gained substantial dominance (see figure 2).

![Figure 2: representation of the percentage of used media frames 2006 – 2010.](image)

From the six partially overlapping but also conflicting frames that were presented in the national media between 2006 and 2010, we can thus derive that the government did not succeed in presenting itself as a unified front. Moreover, we can also document a swift and lasting emergence of a strong so-called counternarrative, which was crafted by oppositional parties and factions that undermined or ran counter to governmental declarations as to the aim, nature, and state of the mission. Hence, our first key element of a strategic narrative, a clear and compelling mission purpose, was obviously lacking.

Secondly, it is possible to offer some explanations for the peaks and fissures in the frames’ graph. Interestingly enough, no direct correlation between casualties and frames was established – a fact that can be explained by pointing to the backlog or even lack of information released on battles being waged “on the ground” in Afghanistan. Elsewhere, others have argued in some detail that a “body bag syndrome” could not be established for the Netherlands (Everts 2008; Van der Meulen 2008).

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5 One note to frame identification: The “COIN” frame also included references to “guerrilla war”, whereas the “Article 100” frame also incorporates notions on NATO-obligations and humanitarian duties.
and Vos 2008; Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2010). In fact, in a few instances casualties even caused a rally 'round the flag phenomenon. On the media front, however, other triggers and causal effects between events and frame amplitude could be identified. They could be traced back to the following two elements: The effect of launching frames on the part of specific authoritative actors and the effect of parliamentary debates.

“Who narrates?” is a question already posed by Antoniades et al. (2010), highlighting the fact that media organizations act both as a platform for traditional public diplomacy, i.e., for the transmission of content by government officials to the public, and as a channel allowing new “bottom up” strategic narratives, or frames, to be disseminated by non-traditional actors, pundits, or opposition leaders to the public (Idem, 7). Some traditional actors, e.g., some government ministers, are able to retain credibility and authority; the reliability of others will be successfully contested and their power, norms, and rules attacked and transformed. Frames can be used, and were used in the Dutch debate on military deployment in Afghanistan, to wage a veritable “battle of ideas”; from which we can infer a clash of competing norms and visions regarding “what Dutch identity really is about” (Idem, 16). In this debate, the positional power of the actors did matter, as did the “event” of a parliamentary debate, where the said actors met in person.

How did this “battle of ideas” play out? By following the use of the six different frames, we can arrive at a dynamic account of “the war on the domestic front.” At first, as described above, the launch of the government’s Article 100 in December 2005 was an authoritative account, and was clearly accepted and transmitted as such in the media (see figure 1). Other official declarations by the Minister of Defense, or the cabinet as such, mainly in parliament, or through speeches by the Commander of the Armed Forces, were directly translated into an uptick in the number of governmental frames in the media. The governmental actors were clearly represented as legitimate and considered transparent.

However, at the same time, while debating the mission in parliament, interventions and statements produced by the opposition were accepted as eagerly as well. During these debates, the “reconstruction frame” entered the picture and immediately soared high. This occurred in February 2006 (during a parliamentary debate on the Article 100 letter), and again in the summer of 2006 and 2007. In the course of a general consultation in the Second Chamber on 2 February 2006, member Farah Karimi (Groenlinks; Green Party), for example, defined the Dutch deployment as a “combat mission,” as opposed to her stated ideal of a “reconstruction mission,” even before the first TFU rotation became operational (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 207: 19). The term “combat
mission” soon found its way to other opposition parties (the SP and later also by D66 and the PVV), heralding the beginning of a long discussion over the mission – a discussion that centered on the (supposed) opposition between the terms “reconstruction mission” and “combat mission” (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 79: 4195–4199).

Other debates initiated by critics in Parliament, and keenly reproduced in the media, centered on the question whether the Dutch reconstruction activities would overlap with the American combat operations carried out under Operation Enduring Freedom. Dutch soldiers were supposed to build schools, promote women’s emancipation, and invest in local government – according to the dominant counternarrative launched by the opposition – rather than do much fighting. Conservative parties denounced this “soft” approach and doubted the usefulness of one-sided humanitarian activities in a country so deeply divided and scourged by armed conflicts. Ministers Bot and Kamp tried to turn the tide by referring to the governmental Article 100-letter, which presented the mission as a “hybrid,” and by pointing out that the government had never suggested that the venture would involve such a simplistic dichotomy (Official Parliamentary Reports, no. 222). But the damage was already done. Not only in public debate but also in the media the TFU was increasingly discussed in terms of this contrast (Van Reijn 2007, 23).

As in other western democratic countries, these debates in the Netherlands saw an increasing tendency to avoid referring to “war,” “fighting,” and “the enemy” and to engage rather an emphasis on “reconstruction,” “peace,” “humanitarian intervention,” and even “security. Oppositional voices flaunted images of combat and battles as they sought to attack the mission’s alleged reconstruction-focused nature (which was pure conjecture, since the official “hybrid” frame allowed for both fighting and reconstructing). In the following years, the Ministry of Defense tried to break out of this polarized discussion. On 5 October 2007 General Dick Berlijn, then Commander of the Armed Forces, let it be known that he was not at all happy with the term “reconstruction mission.” Minister Van Middelkoop stressed that the mission in southern Afghanistan should be characterized neither as a “reconstruction mission” nor as a “combat mission” (Van Middelkoop, 2007; Koninklijke Landmacht, 2008: 19). Other commanders undertook similar attempts. These nuances had little effect, however. The contradiction between combat and reconstruction kept popping up in public perception and debate.

Due to these polarized debates and the repetition of the fighting vs. reconstructing dichotomy, the reconstruction frame kept dominating the governmental frames. A brief spell of “3D” popularity was induced in April 2009 by the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s appraisal for the so-called Dutch
approach of defense, development, and diplomacy, and by the repetition of that statement by US President Barack Obama in July 2009 (a smart political calculation geared towards mobilizing Dutch political support for prolongation of the deployment for 2010) (Brocades Zaalberg 2013; Obama 2009; Magnier 2009). However, throughout the peaks and troughs of the various frames, the governmental ones (including the “3D” and “ink spot”) were never able to gain the upper hand, while the opposition’s counternarratives regarding the lack of success and the faltering prospect of reconstruction remained on top and climbed up again during the mission’s last rotation in 2010.

The ink/oil spot approach, the “COIN” frame, or even the “3D” frame were catchy enough, but never achieved the same star status as the oppositional counternarrative, combined with the media savvy dichotomy of “fighting vs. reconstructing” throughout the years of deployment. In sum, the hybrid, effervescent governmental frame did not stand a chance against the combined forces of the oppositional counter-frames and narrative. Moreover, governmental actors themselves appeared shifty, changing the way they framed the mission’s end-state in military, diplomatic, or developmental terms according to the political weather. Cabinet members did not present a unified front, bickered with each other, and got entangled in nitty-gritty procedural debates with members of parliament early in the history of the mission’s deployment decision.

A final intriguing question probes into the possible correlation between media frames and events on the ground in Afghanistan. A crude “casualty aversion effect” (Muller 1973, 2005) could not be established. However, if we define this relation as the nexus between perceived losses or setbacks and the art of providing meaningful interpretations thereof by means of a strategic narrative, we may discern some clues. Many authors state that cost-benefit calculations made by the public or presented in the media are deeply affected by elite rhetoric in framing the events (Perla 2011; Coticchia and De Simone 2014). In fact, some elements of this mechanism are visible in the Dutch debate about the mission, when a series of operations in Uruzgan made it into dramatic stories of fighting in the Dutch media (see Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2010). Initially, shooting incidents, such as the “battle for Chora,” in June 2007, when one Dutch soldier was killed and dozens of Afghan citizens were wounded and killed, kept trust and pride in the Armed Forces’ capacities high. However, protests against the mission increased and in October 2007 the sum of supporting and opposing percentages (as polled by the Ministry of Defense) first fell below zero (figure 3). Two more operations in the same province and a series of IED-incidents had undermined the governmental frame of the “hybrid” mission (it was all fighting now) and reinforced the counternarrative (“the mission was sold to us as a reconstruction one, and now it is all fighting”).
Figure 3. Level of public support (percentage of the population supporting the Uruzgan mission, minus the percentage opposing it), 2006–2010 (calculations based on: Ministry of Defense, 2010).

“I would say that the politicians have not explained the mission well enough,” Dutch general and then Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces Dick Berlijn commented (2008). Indeed, the majority of the Dutch population did not believe (anymore) that the TFU would succeed in their efforts. When Commander of the armed forces General Peter van Uhm was confronted with negative polling results on the perception of the mission’s success, he stated that the Dutch government had to work harder to improve its strategic communication (van Uhm, 2009). But it was too late, in February 2010 the cabinet fell and the deployment ended.

Conclusion

How did the Dutch government fare in the battle of ideas that erupted after the announcement of the military deployment in Uruzgan? Studies of public opinion and the media debate in the Netherlands surrounding the military deployments in Afghanistan, let alone other recent missions, are dearly lacking. Given our first-round attempt to identify and analyze the frames, we concluded that the essential building block in crafting a successful strategic narrative was missing in the case of the Netherlands: no clear and compelling mission purpose was formulated, no dominant strategic narrative emerged. All told, the Dutch debate can be best characterized as a constant flux of conflicting and overlapping concepts and arguments, with the parliament as an arena of confused elite rhetoric and oppositional bashing. Owing to internal and party-political conflicts between the Labor party and the Christian democrats who constituted the coalition at the time, the cabinet, though prolonged in 2008, was dissolved in February 2010.
Antoniades et al. (2010) are correct in ascertaining that “identifying the ‘effects’ of news media or narrative strategies is an unresolved methodological problem.” Media criticism within a national polity is “indexed to” the degree of elite consensus on a given military operation. However, if a “policy vacuum appears,” and/or “national parties begin to contest a policy . . . media will contain more oppositional sources and ‘frames’” (Idem, 9; Entman, 1993, 2004). In such a constellation, the absence of a clear strategic narrative, in conjunction with political opposition, will have an effect on public opinion (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007). Indeed, given the already low endorsement rates in the Netherlands for military operations related to the War on Terror (Iraq and Afghanistan), it comes as no surprise that the Dutch public was not convinced by these overlapping, vague, and even contradictory descriptions of the mission’s purpose.

The Dutch case is an interesting one because it clearly shows the effect of contradicting media frames on the creation and reception of strategic narratives by the government, on the decision making process, and, ultimately, on the termination of a military deployment. This chapter thus contributes to the literature on strategic narrative in demonstrating how the failure (or impossibility) to arrange for a “unified frame production” inadvertantly undermined any official governmental strategic narrative. One could argue that participating in a “war of choice” (which Afghanistan was to the Netherlands) in a situation of political division and volatile pluralities requires – to say the least – a highly skilled strategist in the “battle of ideas” at home.

Of course a number of caveats are called for. First of all, strategic narratives and frames do not operate in a vacuum; their effect is linked to other factors: to the political system, national culture, the medialogandscape, and the receptiveness of the audience. This includes the conditions created and presented by national traditions, cultural norms and values, as well as by recent historical experiences with similar operations, under which a national audience receives the narrative as presented by the government on the next military mission. If public opinion is highly sensitive to issues of legality and legitimacy, these factors should be taken into consideration in both the narrative and the decision making process surrounding the purported mission. If public support happens to be at a fairly low level, reflecting, e.g., military failures in recent history, this condition will inevitably reflect back on the success of any new operations.

Secondly, as stated above, strategic narratives cannot be plugged into people’s minds directly. The media will inevitably act as an intermediate force. Due to mechanisms of “medialogics” and the inclination to act as “watchdogs,” journalists will tend to simplify the news, adapt and abbreviate
statements to fit in with existing patterns and frames, and will – because of their dramatic power when it comes to newsworthiness – tend to concentrate more on critical comments, counternarratives, and out-of-whack incidents rather than complacently copying and pasting official statements on a mission into their reports and broadcasting. “Government is always a villain, never a hero of media stories”, as James Stimson (2004) puts it. Dichotomies and failures make better news than balanced assessments. By tuning in to structural preferences for, e.g., humanitarian actions that bolster stability efforts and by appropriating or making use of existing news frames, government communicators might well be able to influence their audience and to calibrate and stabilize fluctuations in public support caused by recent mishaps or scandals.

In the third place, elite responsiveness is further dictated by the nature of the political system. Why and when political elites act, sensitive as they are to media frames or public opinion, depends to a large extend on their own sense of principle and the earned action-radius coming to them. In the Hungarian case (chapter 11), elites were perfectly able to withhold information from the public and act totally on their own instincts. Elsewhere we have also argued that the value of coherent strategic narratives as voiced and put forward by oppositional parties is a decisive factor as well. Counternarrative dominance can spoil all positive governmental efforts in mobilizing public support (Dimitriu and de Graaf 2014; see also the Conclusion of this volume), especially in situations with multiparty coalitions, or weak executive autonomy.

However, what we can derive from this empirical study into the presentation of conflicting media frames, as a key aspect in understanding the workings of strategic narratives, is the importance of elite rhetoric as such. Although the effect of elite framing is hard to assess in quantifiable terms, the political realm is undoubtedly crucial to crafting and propagating media frames (Baum and Groehling, 2010). Authoritative actors (politicians in the government and the opposition alike) meet in the arena (parliament) to engage in a battle of ideas, where consistency, persuasion, and persistence clearly matter. Those who fail to produce a clear and compelling storyline, or who refrain from countering a metaphorical attack with equal eloquence and united persistency, have lost the battle already. For a generally indifferent, uninformed, or inattentive audience the creation of and recourse to competing frames demonstrates a lack of leadership and calculated strategy. Inconsistency unravels any sense of sound interpretation and discredits the presentation, however cogent, of costs and benefits. As for the Dutch deployment to Uruzgan, any “halo effect” of defining the mission as successful was lost and the battle of ideas ended in a political defeat.
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