



# Learning from History: The Netherlands' Support for Ukraine's Security

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## **Learning from History: The Netherlands' Support for Ukraine's Security**

*By Floris van Berckel Smit*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced many states to adapt swiftly to a new security environment. The Netherlands responded by mobilising its diplomatic and military capabilities. Focusing on the Netherlands Armed Forces' Task Force Ukraine and the Dutch embassy in Kyiv, this commentary examines how insights from the past shaped the initial response to the war and what lessons other smaller states can draw from the Dutch experience.*

### **COMMENTARY**

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, governments across Europe and beyond were confronted with the urgent task of organising support for Kyiv. For the Netherlands, this required swift adaptation and the ability to mobilise knowledge and capabilities, including insights from the past.

The Netherlands is expanding its Defence Attaché Office in Kyiv this year to become its largest military representation office in the world. This was not the case at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The efforts outlined below were therefore undertaken with relatively limited resources. The Dutch experience demonstrates how smaller states can play a meaningful role in supporting an ally in war while also gaining valuable insights from the conflict.

### **Helping an Ally: Task Force Ukraine**

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, the Netherlands Armed Forces established a task force in the summer of 2022 to organise military support for Ukraine. The Task Force is based in the Netherlands and is organisationally separate from the Defence

Attaché Office at the embassy in Kyiv. Its primary objective was to deliver weapon systems and capabilities that would strengthen Ukraine's combat power.

Unlike some other countries, the Dutch Task Force was placed directly under the Chief of Defence. In Denmark, for example, the task force functioned primarily as a policy coordination body. The Dutch structure resulted in short lines of communication between political-military leadership decisions and implementation. Consequently, the Task Force occupied a strong position within the Ministry of Defence, maintaining regular contact with both the Chief of Defence and the Minister of Defence. Starting with just 2.5 full-time equivalents in the Netherlands, supported by two staff members stationed abroad, the Task Force has since grown into a project directorate with more than 60 staff.

This structure proved especially beneficial in the initial phase, when much of the resource support from the Netherlands was drawn from existing stockpiles. When Ukrainian needs were communicated to allies through the [International Donor Coordination Centre](#), initially in Stuttgart and later in Wiesbaden, the Task Force was often able to respond within one or two weeks.

The Netherlands delivered a variety of weapon systems, both old and new. Several older systems, particularly ground-based air defence assets, had long been phased out of Dutch service, resulting in limited up-to-date expertise. To address this gap, the Task Force drew on institutional memory. Retired service members were brought back, and documentation was retrieved from archives, libraries, and military museums. Their knowledge helped build a practical knowledge base that could be translated into Ukrainian.

The Netherlands also supplied modern systems early on. It was among the first countries to supply Patriot launchers, with Dutch personnel responsible for training Ukrainian operators. Under normal circumstances, training for such systems could take up to ten months. Given the urgency of the situation, this was compressed into about ten weeks, with a focus only on essential skills. This experience showed that training cycles can be significantly shortened during wartime. The Netherlands also played a leading role, alongside Denmark and the United States, in delivering [F-16 fighter aircraft](#) to Ukraine, including training, maintenance, financing, and ammunition, with support from the aircraft manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

A direct feedback loop was also established between Ukrainian operators and the Task Force, enabling questions to be addressed whenever systems malfunctioned or needed repair. This process also provided valuable lessons for the Netherlands. The systems were used for the first time in high-intensity warfare and under far greater strain than in previous missions such as Afghanistan or Iraq. For example, it revealed that Dutch stockpile planning had not anticipated the scale at which artillery would be employed in large-scale warfighting.

Another lesson concerned sustainment. Delivering a weapon system alone proved insufficient. Ammunition supply, fuel, spare parts, and logistics were equally essential. Much of this knowledge had diminished over decades of expeditionary

operations and had to be relearned as the focus shifted back to large-scale warfighting.

Although memories of the 2016 Dutch [referendum](#) on the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement had not faded, and trust was therefore not guaranteed at the beginning of 2022, the early delivery of advanced and costly systems by the Netherlands quickly improved bilateral relations. The scale and consistency of Dutch support were appreciated by Ukraine and translated into close cooperation. This, in turn, provided the Netherlands with access to operational feedback and lessons learned from the war.

### **Understanding the Adversary: The Embassy in Kyiv**

Alongside the Task Force, the Dutch embassy in Kyiv played a crucial role in interpreting developments on the ground. Beyond executing policy from The Hague, it served as a key source of information for policymakers and service members in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. A central question in the early phase concerned Russian behaviour: What could be expected from the Kremlin and how should Russian attacks be interpreted?

Past Russian operations were analysed to better understand possible patterns of behaviour. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 served as a useful reference point. Practices observed there, such as taking control of local governance, installing proxies, and organising pseudo-elections, reappeared in Russian-occupied territories after 2022. When referenda were announced, the embassy already had a sense of how these might unfold, including armed men at polling stations, door-to-door voting, and election officials recording votes under the watchful eyes of armed guards.

Russian operations in Syria and Chechnya were also analysed. Practices seen there reappeared in Ukraine, including double-tap strikes and the redeployment of senior officers who had previously served in Syria. The embassy's analysis also focused on questions such as what specific commanders had done in earlier campaigns and what that might imply for Ukraine. The aim was not to predict events with certainty, but to identify plausible scenarios and assist policymakers in interpreting developments during a fast-moving conflict.

The war in Ukraine has also led to new developments, most notably in the widespread use of drones. However, much remains consistent. Armed forces rarely change the way they fight within five or ten years, and sometimes not even over decades, because replacing equipment and updating training concepts takes considerable time.

### **Lessons Learnt**

The work of the Dutch Task Force and embassy illustrates how insights from the past can be used in practical ways during a crisis.

- Short lines between military and political leadership improve speed, clarity of intent, and effective execution during crises.
- Preserving institutional memory is crucial, whether it concerns operational experience or knowledge about weapon systems.
- Training cycles can be shortened significantly in wartime.
- Structured feedback loops are essential, including lessons related to stockpile planning and the sustainability of deployed systems.
- Small states can exercise influence beyond their size through timely and substantial military support, thereby building trust and gaining access to critical operational information.
- Reviewing past conflicts can help policymakers understand adversary behaviour and develop realistic scenarios, even though past patterns do not guarantee that future actions will unfold in exactly the same way.

## **Conclusion**

The Dutch response in 2022 was largely improvised under crisis conditions. There was no blueprint for how to respond. Yet the experience shows that small states can adapt quickly when institutions are able to mobilise existing knowledge, maintain close political-military coordination, and learn from developments on the battlefield. War and conflict often accelerate learning and innovation. The lessons emerging from Ukraine, therefore, not only strengthen support for Ukraine itself but may also benefit other states.

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