

# Greater than the sum of their parts: Benelux country briefing

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The Benelux countries have a long history of military co-operation. This is particularly the case with the Belgian and Royal Netherlands navies, which are under joint command, and the two countries' air forces, which take turns guarding Benelux airspace. *Nicholas Fiorenza* examines how Benelux joint capabilities are improving after years of defence cuts

Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, known collectively as the Benelux nations, are among the lowest spenders on defence in NATO in terms of GDP, according to the alliance's latest estimates. The Netherlands spends 1.15% of its GDP on defence: the ninth-lowest of the 28 NATO member states that were alliance members at the beginning of 2017. Belgium and Luxembourg, meanwhile, are the lowest spenders in the alliance, at 0.9% and 0.46% of their GDP respectively.

Belgium is aiming to increase its defence spending from 0.9% to 1.3% by 2030, not including pensions. If pensions are included, Belgium plans to reach the 2% called for by NATO by 2024.



*A Dutch Patriot air defence system firing a missile during a training exercise on Crete in October 2016. (Netherlands MoD)*

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The outlook is slightly better in terms of reaching the NATO guideline of spending 20% of defence budgets on major equipment and related research and development (R&D). NATO estimates that the Netherlands spends 16.8% of its defence budget in this way and Luxembourg invests the

second-highest percentage of the 28 nations that were alliance members at the beginning of 2017: nearly 33% of its very low defence budget. Belgium, however, is the second-lowest in NATO at 5.3%.

Meanwhile, Belgium spends the largest percentage of any NATO member on military and civilian personnel, including pensions: an estimated 76% in 2017, according to alliance figures. The figure for the Netherlands is nearly 51% and Luxembourg nearly 39%.

The Benelux countries have a combined population of about 29 million, broken down into 17 million Dutch, 11.5 million Belgians, and 580,000 Luxembourgers.

In 2017 Belgium had 28,000 military personnel, the Netherlands 41,000, and Luxembourg 800, according to NATO.

None of the Benelux countries have conscription, with Belgium in 1992 becoming the first NATO country still using conscription at the end of the Cold War to abolish it. The Netherlands, meanwhile, took in its last conscripts in 1995, although it has never formally abolished conscription, while Luxembourg replaced conscription with volunteer service in 1967.

## **The Netherlands**

Under the Netherlands' Defensienota (Defence memorandum) 2018, published on 26 March, EUR6 billion (USD7.3 billion) more will be spent on defence during 2018–21 than previously planned: EUR910 million this year, EUR1.2 billion next year, EUR1.4 billion in 2020, and EUR1.5 billion in 2021. Nevertheless, defence spending will not increase above 1.3% of GDP during that period.

The main tasks of the Netherlands armed forces are the protection of national and allied territory, including the country's Caribbean territories, promoting international law and stability, and supporting the civil authorities in law enforcement, emergency response, and humanitarian aid nationally and internationally.

## **RNLN**

The Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN) is made up of the Maritime Expeditionary Staff Netherlands Forces (NLMARFOR), diving groups, and 23 warships under the naval command at Den Helder. The ships belonging to the service comprise four Zeven Provinciën-class air defence and command (LCF) frigates, two Karel Doorman-class multipurpose-frigates (M-frigates), four Holland-class offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), four Walrus-class diesel-electric submarines, two landing platform docks (LPDs), a joint support ship, and six Alkmaar-class mine countermeasures vessels (MCMVs).

LCF frigates equipped with the Signal Multibeam Acquisition Radar for Targeting – Long range (SMART-L) radar position the Netherlands as a leader in European air defence and related radar technology, according to the Dutch Ministry of Defence (MoD).

Patrols of the four OPVs were suspended following problems with the sprinkler system on HNLMS *Holland* in October 2017. However, the issue was resolved earlier than expected so the first of class could be deployed to the Caribbean in March.

The Royal Netherlands Marine Corps (RNMC) consists of two marine combat groups with a headquarters and six squadrons each, supported by a surface assault and training group, plus the Netherlands Maritime Special Operations Forces (NLMARSOFF). The latter consists of a maritime counter-terrorism squadron, a conventional squadron, and a training squadron.

Since 1973 the RNMC has been part of the United Kingdom-Netherlands Landing Force (UK/NL Landing Force), working closely with the UK Royal Marines. The UK/NL Landing Force is now part of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force. UK and Dutch marines still conduct joint amphibious exercises and combined training, although shrinkage in both nations' forces, combined with operational commitments of ships and troops, have reduced the tempo since the Cold War, when the United Kingdom's 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines deployed to Norway annually alongside an RNMC battalion. However, NATO and the Netherlands' current refocus on collective defence has revived this co-operation.

Meanwhile, the RNMC is also increasing its co-operation with Germany. In September 2017 the RNMC and the German Navy's Sea Battalion reached initial operational capability to co-operate in certain areas and be deployed together. The completion of the integration of the German Sea Battalion into the RNMC under the command of NLMARFOR is foreseen for 2020 under a letter of intent signed by then Dutch defence minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert and her German counterpart, Ursula von der Leyen, in February 2016 to co-operate more closely on protecting military sea transport. This co-operation includes harbour and point defence, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), evacuation missions, ship boarding missions, and shared use of the joint support ship *Karel Doorman* (not to be confused with the M-frigate class of the same name).

Once the Defensienota has been implemented the RNLN is expected to be able to deploy a five-ship maritime task group and a marine battalion for short alliance collective defence or crisis management operations. For longer periods it is expected to be able to deploy two warships, including an LCF for ballistic missile defence, plus a submarine, an MCMV, and marines.

The RNLN will replace its M-frigates and MCMVs in co-ordination with Belgium. It will also procure a second support ship and replace its Walrus-class submarines. This is in addition to the modernisation of the service's LCF frigates and the mid-life update of an LPD. Surface-to-surface missiles and Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile (ESSM) air defence systems will be modernised, the LCF's 127 mm guns will be replaced, and Goalkeeper close-in weapon system will be installed in all surface vessels.

## **RNLAF**

The Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAF) has 61 F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft, most of which are operated from Leeuwarden and Volkel air bases, and an initial two F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters. In April the F-35s completed their last test flights as part of the F-35 programme's system development and demonstration phase and have begun their operational and evaluation phase, which is expected to last until mid-2019. More F-35s will be delivered to the RNLAF in 2019, initially for pilot training in the United States, with the first aircraft expected to arrive in Leeuwarden at the end of that year.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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