

Extract from the PM's meeting with Mr Van Agt,  
PM Netherlands on 6 December 1979

Theatre Nuclear Force Modernisation

Mr. van Agt said that, so far as the possibility of securing agreement for NATO's TNF proposals was concerned, the present situation in his country was bad and getting worse from day to day. The public mood in the Netherlands showed some signs of mass psychosis. The wave of feeling had begun to gather force two or three weeks previously. By now 50% of the sermons in the churches were dealing with the subject. The issue was endangering the

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survival of the Government. The fall of a NATO Government on a NATO issue would be a very serious development. The Prime Minister agreed.

Mr. van Agt said that, in his judgement, a majority of the electorate would, like the Danes, favour a moratorium, i.e., no decision either on production or deployment of cruise missiles. The Prime Minister asked whether this was regardless of the Soviet reaction. Would a Soviet failure to produce a quid pro quo have any effect on Dutch opinion? Mr. van Agt said that it would not.

In these circumstances, the Dutch Government had, in Mr. van Agt's view, three options:-

- (a) To accept the NATO proposals as they stood. This would be political suicide. The present Government would fall and would almost certainly be replaced by a Government whose views would be significantly less palatable to NATO;
- (b) To go along with Dutch opinion and to tell the Alliance that they had no discretion to accept the NATO proposals. In these circumstances the Government would survive, but there would be no NATO decision. This would represent a major step towards the isolation of the Netherlands within NATO;
- (c) To find a position midway between those summarised above. This was what Mr. van Agt himself hoped to do. He had discussed the matter with his Foreign Minister, Mr. van der Klaauw, and his Defence Minister, Mr. Scholten, but with no other members of Cabinet. The midway position would

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be to say that the Dutch Government could not commit themselves to agreement now on deployment of cruise missiles, but that they would make a "commitment to commit". This would mean expressing a willingness to accept the missiles in, say, two years time, i.e. at the end of 1981 if by that time it was clear that arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union had produced inadequate results. It would be crucial in any such formula to be clear as to who would make the judgement about the results of the arms control negotiations. The answer should be given by the Alliance as a whole, rather than by the Dutch Government on their own.

Mr. van Agt said that his third, and preferred, option would also involve two further features. The Government would have to criticise publicly the scale of the proposed programme. They would point out that NATO had opted for a figure very close to the upper end of the range identified by the High Level Group. They would also wish to raise questions about the relationship between the decision to deploy 108 Pershing II missiles and the offer in the MBFR Option III proposal to withdraw 36 Pershing Is. Secondly, Mr. van Agt said, the Dutch Government would ask to be allowed to relinquish some of their present nuclear assignments as soon as they accepted the TNF modernisation programme. Mr. van Agt concluded his presentation by remarking that he did not feel ashamed of the posture he had been forced to take up. His own views on NATO were

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firm, but, however heroic it might be, to take a strong stand now would be fruitless. It would merely result in his Government being overthrown, and an administration more hostile to NATO being installed in its place.

The Prime Minister asked whether, even if his Government lost a vote on TNF modernisation, they could not hope to survive a subsequent vote of confidence on the future of the Government as a whole. Mr. van Agt said that the vote of confidence would be lost. The Dutch were "a people of theologians". They were highly individualistic, and preoccupied by matters of conscience. There was a deep reluctance in the country to accept any nuclear weapons. This had become focussed on the TNF issue. Anti-nuclear sentiment was increasing in the younger generation. A further factor was that a minority within the CDA Party had always had considerable distaste for the present coalition. They felt that there should have been a centre/left coalition, rather than a centre/right coalition. The number who felt like this was relatively small, but they were crucial to the survival of the Government, and now had the issue they needed.

The Prime Minister asked whether those who objected to the TNF deployment were not aware of the threat from the Soviet deployment of the SS20 missile. Mr. van Agt said that the general feeling was that it would be better to be occupied than destroyed. Better, in other words, to be red than dead. The Prime Minister asked whether the Dutch would allow others to defend them. Mr. van Agt said that he thought the answer was yes. The Prime Minister said that NATO would have to go ahead with the decision to deploy long-range theatre nuclear weapons, otherwise, the Alliance would lose



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its purpose. The Netherlands could reserve its position while waiting to see what the attitude of the Soviet Government was in arms control negotiations. The Russians were at present playing a traditional psychological game in order to try to discourage NATO from taking decisions. They must not be allowed to get away with this. Mr. van Agt indicated assent. He said that he did not want to block a decision provided it was possible for the other members of the Alliance to go ahead without him.

At this point in the discussion, the Prime Minister and Mr. van Agt decided to move to dinner. But before joining the guests, Mr. van Agt said that he should put on record that the official purpose of his mission had been to advocate, on behalf of the Dutch Government as a whole, the splitting of the NATO decisions on production and on deployment of long-range theatre nuclear weapons. The Dutch Government's official position was that the decision on 12 December should be in favour only of production of the missiles. A decision to deploy them should be taken only in two years time, and only if arms control negotiations had failed to produce results. He would be telling the Press that he had argued the case, but that he had failed to persuade the Prime Minister. He did not intend to revert further to the point.

At dinner, the participants in the tete-a-tete discussion were joined by the Dutch Ambassador, Mr. Fack, and by Mr. van Agt's Press Adviser, Mr. van der Weil. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Sir John Taylor, Lord Bridges, and Mr. P.H. Moberly were also present.

/ Mr. van Agt

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Mr. van Agt summarised what he had said to the Prime Minister about the options, as he saw them, that were open to his Government. He confirmed that he would be prepared to go along with a NATO decision on modernisation. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary expressed doubts as to the credibility of a position in which the Netherlands was an odd man out. Mr. Moberly said that he regarded Mr. van Agt's third option as the least difficult of the various possible courses that might have been taken. However, it would, inevitably, mean that there would be a second decision point facing NATO. The Prime Minister said that it would be essential that this second decision point should be for the Netherlands alone, and should be limited to the question of deployment.

Mr. Moberly asked whether the Dutch commitment would be to the full programme, as proposed by NATO, with a question mark only over the Dutch contribution. Mr. van Agt did not give a direct reply. He commented on the interaction of the Dutch and the Belgian decisions. After the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary had expressed some optimism on the latest developments in Belgian thinking, Mr. van Agt said that he thought the Belgian decision might well come as a disappointment. However, he hoped he had persuaded M. Martens, the Belgian Prime Minister, to postpone his Government's decision until the evening of Monday, 10 December. He planned that the Dutch Cabinet should take its decision the same evening, so that the two decisions would be independent. His own Cabinet did not yet know that this was his intention.

After Mr. Moberly had repeated that the commitment to a full programme was of great importance, Mr. van Agt said that, as he had



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already told the Prime Minister, his Government would have to criticise the size of the programme. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that he hoped, in this event, that Mr. van der Klaauw would not be too hostile. He asked whether, if the total was reduced, the Dutch Government would accept a reduced share. Mr. van Agt said that they would not.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary asked what would happen if the present Dutch Government resigned. Mr. van Agt said that there would have to be new elections early in 1980. The polls were showing a swing to the left, and the coalition partners were losing support. There would be a high probability of a centre/left Government, and some possibility of a left wing Government, which would be a new development for the Netherlands. The source of the swing seemed to be opposition to efforts that the present Dutch Government had made to limit public expenditure. Everyone was in favour of cuts which affected someone else. There was a good deal of tension between the Government and the trade unions.