December 06, 1979

Memorandum of conversation between Dutch Prime Minister van Agt and British Prime Minister Thatcher

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Summary:

Conversation between Dutch Prime Minister van Agt and British Prime Minister Thatcher. Also present were advisors Merckelbach and Alexander. Conversation centers on the political situation in the Netherlands, where resistance to TNF modernization has become widespread. Thatcher questions why the Dutch people fail to recognize the possible threat from the Soviet Union, suggesting “those who prefer being red over being dead ignore the many who are both red and dead.”

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Original Language:

Dutch

Contents:

- English Translation
handwritten memorandum of conversation¹

Archive of A.A.A.M. van Agt, box 41, TNF file, Catholic Documentation Center, University Nijmegen

translation from the Dutch and footnotes: Ruud van Dijk, University of Amsterdam

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Very Secret

Only copy

Report of the conversation between PM van Agt [MP] and PM Thatcher on Thursday December 6 1979 in London in the presence of their advisers Merckelbach and Alexander ...

MP explains that the situation in the Netherlands for NATO gets worse by the day. Resistance against TNF modernization increases constantly. There is a mass psychotic movement washing over the country like a wave. Even in the churches there is preaching against TNF modernization. MP fears that the Dutch cabinet will not survive this situation, which in itself is of no importance to PM. 

PM does have a stake in this, not only because she has the same opinion on many matters as MP, but especially because the fall of a cabinet over a NATO matter in whichever country should be considered a serious matter.

MP remarks that in parliament there actually is a majority resisting any decision whatsoever, only able to agree to a moratorium, that is to say, do nothing and ask the SU also to do nothing any more, but to negotiate.

PM asks if this majority wants this regardless of what the SU does; so without quid pro quo.

MP replies that one does not want an endless moratorium; some want it for 1 year, others for 1/2 year, just like the Danes. In this situation the Dutch cabinet can choose between three options: (1) accept what is on the table in Brussels. This is only an academic possibility because it would mean political suicide for the cabinet. NATO then has a negative reaction from the Netherlands and the next Dutch cabinet will undoubtedly remove itself much further from NATO than where the current one is being forced to go. 

(2) The next option is a position of resignation. The cabinet allows developments to take their course and does not take a decision on the TNF proposals. In that case, the cabinet can probably continue to exist, and it will let NATO know that one cannot even expect a conditional yes from the Netherlands. For NATO this would be an extremely negative thing; after all, it means the first phase of the Dutch isolation within the alliance. It goes without saying that speaker is not interested in this solution. 

(3) The only option open to the cabinet then is to find a position between these two extremes. The maximum MP thinks he can reach -- this option has not yet been discussed in the cabinet -- is that the Netherlands at this time does not agree to the deployment of 48 GLCMs on its territory, but commits -- "commitment to commit" -- itself to accept GLCMs on its territory in 2 years if at that point it concludes that the negotiations with the SU have not yielded any

¹ By Van Agt’s top adviser, J. P. M. H. Merckelbach.
concrete results. The Netherlands could only draw the latter conclusion in consultation with the allies. In light of the fact that many objections have arisen in the Netherlands to the size of the intended TNF-modernization, the Dutch delegation to the special meeting next Wednesday will at least have to make some verbal objections. The third element in this compromise solution is that the Netherlands, accepting a number of GLCMs on its territory, should be able to drop a number of the current nuclear tasks. About this, discussions are already taking place between the Defense ministers involved, which most probably will lead to agreement.

MP hopes to find understanding for the difficult position in which the Dutch cabinet finds itself in spite of his efforts. He is convinced that a firm yes to the NATO proposals, no matter how heroic, will have no advantage whatsoever but only disadvantages for NATO.

PM asks how the population has come to this attitude and how the more right-wing parties, like the VVD, which is to her right, position themselves.

MP replies that the VVD wants to accept the NATO proposals unconditionally, just like the other right-wing parties. This, however, is no help because the cabinet only has a majority of two seats and will only be able to do without 5 to 7 of the 49 CDA votes. The CDA is hopelessly divided over this issue.

PM asks if the CDA will remain divided if the government asks for a vote of confidence. In the UK this is an adequate means to get a rejected proposal through Parliament.

MP replies that a separate vote of confidence is not customary in the Netherlands. The vote over for example the TNF issue counts as a vote of confidence if the government ties its fate to it. How a large part of the population has come to this view has several explanations. A deep dislike of everything connected with nuclear energy is growing, also peaceful applications. This dislike now focuses on TNF-modernization also because the government here actually has something to decide. The young have no memory any more of the war; often they do not see why one should object to the Russians. The Dutch people is a people of theologians, some more so, others less. This also means the Dutchman is a super individualist; each has his own conscience that is decisive, everyone reads the Bible and has his own interpretation. MP next points out that since 1977 a minority of the CDA has been against the current center-right coalition and always has looked forward to a good opportunity to replace it with a center-left one. This minority now sees its chance.

PM asks if those who now rail against TNF-modernization never think about the threat represented by the SS-20 if there was no response from NATO.

MP replies that many of them would prefer a Russian occupation over destruction.

PM remarks that those who prefer being red over being dead ignore the many who are both red and dead. For many of her generation there is no doubt that Hitler could have been stopped by timely action. In that case there probably would not have been a world war with all its horrors. The idea that one could avoid destruction by not resisting is belied by countless examples from history. The Dutch who think this way, do they also not want to be defended by the other NATO members. Furthermore, PM does not understand that people who think so individualistically risk the right to determine their own fate.

MP points out that one should nonetheless distinguish between several groups. Those who are principled nuclear pacifists; those who feel safe underneath the American nuclear umbrella and therefore fail to see why the Netherlands should station nuclear
PM hopes that the compromise-solution now represented by MP will turn out to be feasible. She assumes that at least the Dutch cabinet has no objection that NATO defends the Netherlands and thus has no objection that NATO modernizes while the Netherlands will decide about its share later, depending on what the SU does. She wonders if the public information of the population cannot be improved. On English TV these days images of Russian tanks pulling back from East Germany were accompanied by commentary stating that this was a psychological trick to keep NATO from modernizing TNF. At the close of this broadcast it was shown with the help of a map how the SS-20s cover all of Europe while the old NATO TNF cannot even reach the Russian border. This kind of presentations are convincing, without any commentary.

MP points out that public opinion in the Netherlands is manipulated in a high degree, not so much by the written press as by TV. The government only has access to very limited broadcasting time. MP furthermore points out that after the debate in parliament of November 7, the Dutch cabinet has had to take on the task of convincing the allies that NATO at this time should only decide on production, and not deployment of the new TNF-systems. Next, negotiations with the SU should be brought underway in order to judge in 2 years whether, in light of the course of these negotiations, there should be a decision to deploy after all.

PM remarks that one really cannot expect from the US that it will produce new TNF-systems without knowing whether and where these can be deployed. She believes that where possible the allies should follow one line; otherwise the entire TNF-discussion ends in a victory for the SU. As far as she is concerned MP can tell parliament and the press that the UK sees nothing in the decoupling idea and is willing to defend the Netherlands if it does not object to that.