

Memorandum of conversation
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From: Dr. C. A. van der Klaauw no. 39/79 Date: October 15, 1979

To: S

Subject: TNF-issues

Discussions with Italian officials

SECRET/NIVAL

On October 13 discussions took place at the invitation of of the new Italian Prime-Minister Cossiga with Prime-Minister Van Agt at hotel Villa l'Este on Lake Como. Both Foreign Ministers were also present at these discussions. Except for an interpreter no other officials participated.

Following Prime-Minister Cossiga's proposal, the first topic of discussion was TNF, to which almost three hours were devoted. The Italian message was clear: Italy accepts conclusions High Level Group, fears a largely orchestrated Soviet propaganda-offensive, particularly aimed at the Netherlands and Italy, and believes it important therefore that the decision regarding modernization will be realized as soon as possible. This approach, therefore, as was clear also during the discussion, diverges from the Dutch one, which after all only wants to enable a decision during the ministerial NAC¹ of December.

Prime-Minister Cossiga began the discussion with an explanation of the Italian decisionmaking process. Within the Italian cabinet there is a committee for defense matters, composed beside the PM of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and the Interior. The State Secretary charged with intelligence matters acts as secretary of the committee. For the TNF-issue a liberal and a social-democratic minister have been added to this committee. In this composition the committee has met for strictly secret discussions. It has decided to accept the modernization proposals. The entire council of ministers has been notified of this in a general sense, also in connection with a parliamentary interpellation from the radical side, which will take place on October 25. The decision is currently being submitted to the High Council of Defense (chair, President of the Republic), which has an advising role. After that, the decision formally comes into the Council of Ministers. Cossiga did not doubt a positive decision in both organs. Public declarations in the matter will only be made after the final decision in the Council of Ministers.

¹ North Atlantic Council.

Meanwhile consultations with a number of political leaders had taken place, from which had become clear that the Christian-Democrats, Liberals, Social-Democrats, and Republicans will support the decision. The Socialists were in principle in agreement. Contact had also been made with the Communists. The S.G.² of the Communist party was at that moment not yet in a position to have a discussion, but declared himself willing to meet accompanied by experts. As far as the interpellation on October 25 is concerned, the government would respond "low profile."

Cossiga noted that he had conveyed the position of the Italian government to Mrs. Thatcher and Lord Carrington, to Schmidt and Genscher, and to the American government. Now he also wanted to inform us about it. Incidentally, during a meeting in New York, Malfatti³ had left no doubt with Gromyko.

All this does not detract from the fact that Italy is in favor of a continuation of the detente-policy, multilaterally as well as bilaterally. It hopes for a rapid ratification of SALT II. The decision regarding TNF-modernization needs to be accompanied by a credible and serious disarmament offer. A realistic detente policy can however only be based on a genuine restoration of the balance.

This balance, according to Cossiga, is lacking currently. SALT II freezes the strategic component. The conventional armaments component is imbalanced and can't be evened out through negotiations. Restoration of the balance therefore is only possible via TNF. In addition we are confronted by new Soviet weapons. In this context, Cossiga pointed out that although he can understand the U.S. view that the Backfires are a regional weapon, experts had pointed out to him that they quickly could be transformed into strategic weapons. The situation was extremely dangerous. The Soviet Union kept Europe, North-Africa, the Middle-East, and Pakistan over a barrel with weapons of great precision which through their mobility, moreover, are practically invulnerable; and in this conversation Cossiga was not even going to talk about China. It is a situation which politically could be tempting for the S.U.. Military superiority can be translated into diplomatic and political superiority. In this situation the danger of a conventional arms race cannot be eliminated, with a chance for local conflicts.

Added to that is the advanced age of Soviet leaders. What will a change in the Soviet leadership mean? According to Cossiga there are discussions within the Soviet leadership about the future course. What consequences will Tito's death have? All these uncertainties make the situation even more dangerous.

After this general evaluation Cossiga discussed TNF-modernization directly. We should not dramatize the decision. It does not represent a change in the NATO-strategy, more a confirmation of it. A decision not to modernize would on the other hand represent a change in strategy and it would damage the Western negotiating position and the

² Presumably: Secretary-General.

³ Franco Maria Malfatti, foreign minister.

possibilities to achieve disarmament. There has to be a consensus within NATO, with participation at least of the US, the UK, the nuclearized countries (FRG, Italy, Benelux), and Denmark and Norway. Cossiga underlined particularly the great importance of the support of all nuclearized countries for this decision.

To a question of mine whether this general support was a condition for a positive Italian position, Cossiga said that the condition was a unanimous political decision for modernization. Deployment in all concerned countries was not a condition, although extremely important. The goal after all was to maintain the multilateral nature of the alliance; one had to prevent the emergence of a bilateral connection between the US and FRG. This would be an extremely dangerous development. The FRG should not be placed in an isolated position by its European allies.

Italy is also convinced of the importance of the above because in case of a crisis with the FRG it will have to take the first blow. The troops stationed in Hungary are meant to march via Slovenia to Italy (Cossiga said that several years ago a Soviet-delegate to the MBFR-talks said as much to his Italian colleague).

Cossiga next moved to an initial analysis of Brezhnev's speech in Berlin, which he characterized as the beginning of a large propaganda-offensive, aimed particularly at the Netherlands and Italy. The speech was a cocktail of offers, which possibly are a signal for MBFR, but whose concrete significance is difficult to estimate, and of threats (no nuclear weapons against countries that do not deploy them). About TNF Brezhnev had hardly spoken at all; he had walked around the only realistic solution, namely no longer produce and next destroy.

At this point Malfatti intervened and said that NATO ought to respond to Brezhnev's speech and in a non-polemical way. Cossiga reacted by saying that we can't pretend to have understood everything.

Finally Cossiga pointed to the problem of the single or the dual-key regarding nuclear weapons. In contrast to the FRG, Italy continues to attach importance to a dual-key system also for new weapons.

Next, Prime-Minister Van Agt provided a long explanation of the political situation in the Netherlands in regard to the TNF-issue. His remarks about the connection made in the Netherlands between SALT II ratification and the introduction of a decision regarding TNF-modernization provoked a (quasi?) surprised reaction by Cossiga, who viewed an earlier decision regarding modernization as a condition for the ratification of SALT II, otherwise he envisioned the emergence his dreaded bilateral Washington-Bonn axis. I then pointed at the for us essential and central element of arms control in the decisionmaking over TNF, with SALT II ratification a condition.

Following this there ensued a debate over the time when the decisions about TNF-modernization should be taken. Cossiga underlined his concern about increasing Soviet-

pressure directed to the Netherlands, Italy, and the left wing of the SPD, if a decision would be delayed until the December NAC. His preference was for a decision in the NPG. In response, we responded negatively, both for internal political reasons and because of the importance of the disarmament element, for which a clearly demonstrable contribution of the Foreign Ministers is essential. Cossiga wondered what the NPG would be expected to do in that case. He did not agree with us that the NPG only needed to take note of official reports. From our side it was noted that the bridging report's evaluation cannot be done just by the Defense Ministers.

Cossiga's next suggestion, to let the PRs⁴ in Brussels decide under instructions from their governments directly following the NPG meeting, we also rejected, both because of the time-element and because of the importance of the matter, whose importance required decisionmaking in the presence of ministers. Cossiga then wondered if the dates of the various meetings could not be advanced. This we also resisted, incidentally supported by Malfatti. In the Netherlands this would be seen as a surprise tactic, with all negative political consequences, and the Soviets could see it as evidence of uncertainty, if not panic. We have maintained the position that the decisionmaking program and the dates fixed for the meetings should be kept without change.

The discussion, which incidentally was conducted in a friendly atmosphere with understanding for each other's problems, did not lead to a joint conclusion; on the contrary, it is clear that the Italian views (we have made our decision, this should be confirmed in the alliance as quickly as possible, because otherwise domestic forces, egged on by the S.U., will become ever stronger) are diametrically opposed to ours (all emphasis on a gradual decisionmaking, where the primary importance given to the arms control element will be realized fully). We decided to continue the contacts, also at the ministerial level, in the near future.

⁴ Permanent Representatives.