

December 6, 1979

**Report of the conversation between Italian
Presidente del Consiglio Cossiga and Prime-Minister
van Agt**

Citation:

"Report of the conversation between Italian Presidente del Consiglio Cossiga and Prime-Minister van Agt", December 6, 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archive of A.A.A.M. van Agt, box 41, TNF file, Catholic Documentation Centre, University Nijmegen. Translated from the Dutch by Ruud van Dijk
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/112820>

Summary:

Memorandum of conversation between Italian Prime Minister Francesco Cossiga and Dutch Prime Minister Andreas van Agt. Cossiga opens the conversation by outlining the Italian government's support for limited TNF modernization and rapid ratification of SALT II. In response and at the behest of his government, van Agt suggests decoupling the INF production and deployment decisions.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

Dutch

Contents:

Original Scan

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

very secret

Report of the conversation between Presidente del Consiglio Cossiga and Prime-Minister Van Agt on Thursday December 6 1979 in Rome, in the presence of their advisors Belinguer and Merckelbach, and of B. Riputto, interpreter

P.C. gives a view of the developments of the past days that finally have led the Chamber in a secret vote with a large majority to accept a motion inspired by the government. In the end, it turned out not to be necessary to ask for a vote of confidence. This motion contained the following elements: (1) rapid ratification of SALT II; (2) deliberately strive for detente and disarmament; (3) modernization TNF is necessary in light of the imbalance that has arisen in this area; (4) modernization TNF only to the point required by this imbalance; (5) every Soviet reduction of TNF weapons during or after the negotiations must be followed by reductions in the NATO program, both as concerns production and deployment. Linked to this the desire that it will turn out not to be necessary for NATO to move to deployment of TNF weapons and that NATO will be able to start immediate and courageous negotiations with the SU.

The acceptance of this motion by a large majority (380-220?) meant a major defeat for the communist party. The German SPD-congress has according to PC been a great influence on the course and outcome of this debate. He does not expect significant problems during the debate in the Senate, this coming Monday.

P.M. remarks that his political friends would barely allow him to congratulate the Italian government with the outcome of this debate. His mission in the European capitals and in Washington is a completely different one. Four weeks ago, the CDA has asked of the government that it make the effort to convince the allies that it would be better now to take a decision about the production, and only much later--for example 2 years--a decision about deployment. Back then, this was the view of all 49 CDA members of the Second Chamber. The government has in response declared itself willing to take this message to the allies, adding that, in case the allies are not receptive, a new situation will arise in which the government should reconsider its position. The past four weeks the following developments have occurred. From the allies no positive reaction to the decoupling idea was received initially. Last week, however, a surprising shift has come in the position of Denmark, which however only plays a minor role in this matter. More important is that in the past couple of days shifts are also occurring in the so far firm position of Belgium. One of the factors playing a role here undoubtedly is the influence of the P.v.d.A. on the Flemish socialists. The situation already is such that colleague

¹ By Van Agt's top adviser, J. P. M. H. Merckelbach.

Martens worries greatly over the conduct of the Flemish socialists in the coalition. In the Netherlands itself the situation gets worse by the day for those who 4 weeks ago were still in favor of decoupling. What is happening in the Netherlands has elements of a mass psychotic development, fanned by the biggest part of press and tv which is tinted radically. This development washes like a wave over the cabinet and because it is irrational, it is incontrollable also. PM fears therefore that next week the Dutch cabinet will get into great difficulties, both within NATO and in The Hague. Given this situation, the Dutch government could take three positions:

(1) It could decide to agree with the decisions expressed in the IDD, including the high number of 572 warheads. This almost certainly means political suicide; the cabinet will be blown away. Result of that is (a) a political crisis (in itself not interesting to the allies), but also (b) not a yes from the Netherlands to NATO and (c) almost certainly a new Dutch cabinet that will distance itself far from NATO. The way things stand now it is not even certain that PM will get agreement for this position from the entire cabinet. In other words, if he tried to push this through, there is a good chance that even prior to December 12 a crisis will arise within the cabinet, which then will see the departure of the ministers originating in the ARP².

(2) The government could note a majority has grown in the Netherlands, including parliament, which does not allow it to consent to any kind of decision. The government accepts this in sadness as a fact of life, reports this to NATO and remains in power. But NATO is then confronted with a member state distancing itself from the alliance. The consequences of that could sooner or later spread to other allies.

(3) The government can try to find a position in between these first two options, enabling it (a) to survive, and (b) not to have to give NATO a full no. Put differently, a position that partially does, and partially does not accept the draft-decisions by NATO.

To be concrete, PM tries to reach a position--the cabinet is not yet aware of this, but he will give it his best effort--approximately consisting of the following: (1) some grumbling about the in Dutch eyes far too high number of 572 warheads. More than grumbling will not be necessary because NATO does not decide production. The US decides production and also pays for it. (2) The maximum PM perhaps can achieve is a "commitment to commit" in the following sense: the government expresses now that the Netherlands will accept GLCMs on its territory when at the end of 1981 it would have to conclude that the negotiations with the SU, opened in the meantime, have not produced satisfying results. The Netherlands will not answer this question on its own but in consultation with the allies. (3) Finally there will have to be a certain adjustment of the Dutch nuclear tasks already present. This is an issue of secondary importance about which minister Scholten is consulting with his fellow Defense ministers and which, it appears, will be brought to a solution.

PM realizes that this kind of position will signify a serious disappointment for the allies. Nonetheless, even with a position like this it is not yet certain that he will survive politically, although he does give himself a reasonable chance. He is, however, prepared

² Anti Revolutionaire Partij—Protestant party and one of the three parties forming the united Christian Democratic party, the CDA.

to sacrifice his cabinet if this could yield any kind of advantage for NATO. The opposite unfortunately is the case.

PC asks if the Dutch cabinet will reserve such a position only for itself or plead that all of NATO follows this line.

PM, in the interest of his political survival, has to continue until next Wednesday to represent with great conviction the message that all NATO countries should decide in this sense. He realizes, however, very well that this message will not be received. The latter position is therefore in fact that the Netherlands makes a reservation in regard to the Dutch share of the GLCMs. During the conversation in Villa d'Este³ PM said that he could not imagine that the Netherlands would get in such a position because we are not a people that lets others carry the load while keeping its own hands clean. To his regret he was wrong in this.

PC points out that the Italian government has the ability to do anything within the limits of the position now approved by the parliament. PM should not expect a hardening toward the Netherlands from Italy. PC thinks it of great importance that the Netherlands does not get into a position where it actually becomes separate from NATO. If a price needs to be paid for that, Italy is willing to do so. The decoupling however is difficult to accept; PC has always been convinced that the SU is only willing to enter realistic negotiations if NATO takes a clear decision both on production and on deployment. The decoupling idea would seriously weaken the chance for real negotiations. PC does think it possible to accept this idea as a Dutch reservation, for two reasons: (1) the limited number of GLCMs assigned to the Netherlands; (2) de geographic position of the Netherlands. The guiding countries here are the FRG and Italy, because of their location and in connection with Austria's neutrality. In case of a conflict, this neutrality will be a formal matter. Not only because Austria itself would then abandon it; also because Italy would then be obligated to keep open the connection with the FRG via Austrian territory. In regard to the Tyrolian minority, this will not cause problems; it is strongly anti-SU and more oriented toward the FRG than to Austria. The heart of the matter is the agreement between the FRG and Italy. PC has assured the Bundeskanzler that Italy will not leave the FRG to stand alone. This is not only in the interest of NATO, but of Europe as a whole. An isolated FRG would be obligated to a frightening rearmament or it would have to play the card of German reunification on the basis of neutrality. PC believes that after the acceptance of the IDD by the UK --this is certain-- , by Italy --90% certain-- and the FRG --also certain-- a Dutch reservation in the form of a *pactum de contiatendo* is acceptable. Such a reservation would have to go along with a clear statement that the Netherlands subscribes to NATO and the goal of the TNF-operation, acknowledging this way that given the superiority of the SU in the grey zone, NATO is compelled to restore the balance. In this way, NATO's negotiating strength would not significantly be affected by a Dutch reservation. To take this position, PC does need to be certain of the agreement of the Bundeskanzler. He will also seek confirmation from the US whether this is an acceptable reservation. PC's willingness, therefore, is conditional on the agreement of the FRG and the result of the soundings in the US. PC asks when the Dutch cabinet will decide.

³ Van Agt-Cossiga meeting, October 13, 1979—see Document 4.

PM considers this a crucial issue. He is determined to have this decision as late as possible, in any case not before next Monday evening. The later the Dutch cabinet decides, the smaller the risk that other governments experience negative consequences from it. Speaker will go to London today for a meeting with colleague Thatcher, and tomorrow to Washington, where at 11:45am he will have a meeting with President Carter and others. If before that time colleague Cossiga were able to get in contact with the Americans, this would only be welcome.

The day before yesterday the PM has spoken with Prime-Minister Martens who wonders if it would not be helpful to organize a secret meeting this coming weekend between the heads of government of the five European countries directly involved with the TNF-modernization. PM has neither accepted, nor rejected this idea, but promised that he would raise this with PC and Mrs. Thatcher.

PC cannot react to this immediately. Keeping such a meeting secret is extremely difficult. He also wonders how the US would react to this. PC will evaluate this idea further with his advisors and let PM know.

PM sees the same objections as PC. Such a meeting cannot be kept secret and will perhaps create suspicions with certain parliaments.

PC will have this examined further. Additionally, he will contact Bundeskanzler Schmidt about the Dutch approach, and the Americans, and also--if PM thinks this useful-- the Brits.

PM considers the latter not without value, but the key lies primarily with the FRG and US.

There is agreement that PM and PC will keep in touch, directly by telephone or through their advisors Berliguer and Merckelbach.