

November 26, 1979

Letter from Prime Minister Van Agt to President Carter

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Summary:

Dutch Prime Minister van Agt responds to President Carter's concerns about a Dutch proposal to reduce NATO modernization. He writes that in light of Carter's concern, he will not press the Dutch proposal but that his government remains concerned over the size of the modernization program.

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MINISTER-PRESIDENT

The Hague, November 26, 1979

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IV

Dear Mr. President,

The Netherlands government has given very careful consideration to your letter of November 1. Let me assure you, first of all, that we fully share your view that the December decisions on Theatre Nuclear Force Modernisation and Arms Control will be of crucial importance for the Alliance. This is not only a matter of testing the credibility and the capability of taking difficult decisions, but also of demonstrating the central significance that the Alliance attaches to the role of arms control.

You will be aware that the nature of the decisions now before the Alliance places the Netherlands government before very difficult questions. The Netherlands Minister of Defence, Mr. Scholten, has outlined the present position of the government at the meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group in The Hague and he will certainly seek further contact on this matter with Secretary Brown as well as with other colleagues in the Alliance. I should, however, like to draw your particular attention to some aspects of primary importance in our policy considerations. Basic in this respect is that the Netherlands is fully conscious of the need for a firm NATO answer to the new threat posed by the Soviet military build-up in the long range TNF field, but that this firmness should be perfectly reconcilable with exercising restraint in our armaments policy and with giving maximum room to an effective arms control approach.

His Excellency the President
of the United States of America,
Mr. J. Carter,
The White House,
WASHINGTON.

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In line with this point of view, the Netherlands government has, in the light of discussions in parliament, undertaken to advocate with the allies that the decision to modernize long range TNF should be limited at this stage to a decision to produce the weapon, while a decision on a possible basing in a number of European countries should be taken at a later stage when we will be able to judge the results of arms control negotiations. I would greatly appreciate if the United States government would give careful consideration to the merits of this approach.

As a very important point for the Netherlands government, I should like to underline our problems with the recommended size of the LRTNF. It has always been our understanding that, after the working groups had finished their reports, governments would be fully free to exercise their political judgment concerning the recommendations presented to them. But even the working groups have made clear that the recommended size of the programme was not unassailable, that it was a matter of judgment rather than of calculation, and also, that the size could be smaller or even much smaller if arms control were successful.

In the light of the arguments in your letter, and also taking account of your important offer concerning the unilateral withdrawal of 1.000 warheads, we are prepared not to press our view of halving the programme, but I must submit in all frankness that the proposed size still poses very great difficulties for my government, if we are to find the necessary understanding with our public for the modernisation programme.

In our judgment it is politically very important for us not to create the impression that NATO approaches the coming arms control negotiations with worst case assumptions concerning the possibilities of achieving a positive outcome, by starting out already at this stage with a decision to produce the full number proposed. It would, therefore, in our judgment, be better to begin with a substantially lower number. This would leave open the possibility that NATO could decide at a later stage, for example after two years, to consider going up to the higher number if negotiations would not be sufficiently successful.

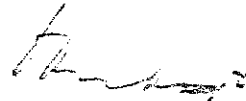
A lower number would also help to remove another very difficult aspect from the present proposals. I mean the one-for-one replacement of the Pershing-I by the Pershing-II missiles. Although these systems are not fully comparable, the production of the full 108 systems could not fail to be interpreted as undercutting the so-called Option-3 proposals in MBFR, which call for a reduction of 36 of the 108 Pershing-I missiles.

The Netherlands government and parliament have from the first attached very great importance to the MBFR negotiations as a first start of arms control in the European region, and the nuclear offer of Option-3 has acquired particular importance as a real and genuine step in the direction of reducing the dependence on nuclear weapons, a factor which is of prime importance in the policy programme of the Netherlands government and is strongly supported by all the main parties in this country.

Finally, I should like to emphasize once again that we are fully convinced of the great importance of the decisions which are now before the Alliance and we are also completely aware that it is of very great importance that the decision would be taken by all members collectively. It is for that reason, that political deliberations among the allies in the remaining weeks should lead to decisions, which would be acceptable not only to the Netherlands government, but which also would find adequate support in the Netherlands parliament.

It is with that purpose in mind that I have availed myself of this opportunity to put our views on this vital issue for the Alliance before you in all frankness.

Sincerely,



(A.A.M. van Agt)