December 5, 1979

Exchange of notes, Defense Minister Scholten (also to other NATO Defense ministers) – British Defense Secretary for Defense

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Summary:

Defense Minister Scholten writes to other NATO Defense Ministers to clarify the position of the Netherlands on TNF modernization. He focuses on issues related to the size of the modernization program, which in its current state he fears is too large, and also the possibility of separating the issues of making a decision on modernization and then implementing it. The British Defense Secretary then writes to refute each of his concerns on the wider issue of TNF modernization. An addendum focuses more specifically on the issues relating to the Netherlands.

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MINISTER
VAN DEFENSIE

The Hague 23 November 1979
No. 459.618/G

Dear colleague,

After the discussion we had at last week's ministerial NPG-meeting on the issue of lrtnf-modernisation and arms control I feel it might be useful, if only for the sake of clarity, that I once more explain to you my position on this matter. In doing so I want to come back briefly to some points I raised in my intervention at the NPG-meeting and for which I ask your serious consideration.

The first point concerns the relationship between the production decision and the deployment of the new weapons. As you know the Christian Democratic party, the larger of the two parties supporting the Van Agt-government, favours an alliance decision on production in December, making the actual deployment dependent on the results of arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Though this approach was heavily criticized by some of our colleagues at last week's meeting, I do believe that the real difference between this aproach and the one envisaged in the "integrated decision document" is not as big as it may seem. In both cases the number of warheads that will ultimately be deployed will be affected by arms control. In both cases it will be necessary to evaluate the results of arms control negotiations and to reach a consensus about these results before the actual deployment of the new systems. Thus in neither case will the actual deployment automatically result from decisions that are going to be made at the end of this year.

My second point has to do with the size of the programme. In raising this issue I fully recognize the excellent analytical work done by our experts in the "high level group". I want to note, however, that their recommendation as to the size of the programme is based on the assumption that no meaningful results of arms control negotiations will be reached until 1985. I want to stress again that we have to pass a political judgment on the work of our experts. In this respect I believe that the goal of successful arms control can be better pursued by deciding on a programme of a smaller size than recommended with the possibility of upward and downward adjustments in the light of the outcome of arms control negotiations.

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Apart from this the proposed number of 572 warheads is clearly in the upper range of the 200 to 600 additional warheads recommended to us as an "evolutionary upward adjustment" in the spring report of the high level group, which - at least in the Netherlands - has a negative political effect.

Without coming forward at this moment with proposals as to the numbers, I want to let you know that my government has the most serious political difficulty in accepting the size of the programme proposed.

Thirdly and finally there is the question of the total Netherlands contribution to NATO's tnf. Any possible participation of my country in the lrtnf-programme will necessarily entail a reconsideration of our present so-called nuclear tasks. When we had our personal contact prior to the NPG-meeting, I provided you with a strictly confidential paper, marked annex B, containing my intentions on this matter. As I told you on that occasion I don't want to take unilateral decisions. In the margi of the NPG-meeting you promised to inform me in time of any objections you might have to my intentions. If you might wish to receive any further explanation on a military or official level I'll be glad to take the necessary steps to arrange this. In any case the adjustments in our contribution will be put before NATO as soon as the Netherlands government has made its decisions. At the present stage of decision-making I must ask you once more to treat this matter on a strictly confidential basis.

Sincerely,

VERZENDLIJST

His Excellency Mr. José Desmarets
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His Excellency Mr. Attilio Ruffini
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His Excellency Mr. Thorvald Stoltenberg
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Minister van Defensie
Secr.

Aan: de Minister-President

Bijgaande teksten werden heden om 14.30 uur door de Engelse ambassadeur aan Minister Scholten overhandigd.

De Minister meende er goed aan te doen U een kopie van deze teksten te doen toekomen.

5-12-1979

TEXT OF MESSAGE FROM SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE TO THE NETHERLANDS MINISTER OF DEFENCE

Thank you very much for your personal letter of 23 November about LRTNF modernisation. I have admired the seriousness of the debate on this issue in the Netherlands, even when I have disagreed with particular points made; and I value the opportunity to offer my views on the aspects to which your letter draws attention.

The first is the concept of separating in time the decisions on production and on deployment. Frankly, I believe the distinction between the two is, in all the circumstances of today's situation, an unreal one. A British Prime Minister of past days used to say "it is unwise to cross a chasm in two leaps". That, in my judgement, is what a production/deployment split would be doing. The world, and in particular the Soviet Union, would recognise that NATO had taken only half a decision: more particularly, they would recognise that the missing half was the European half. This would amount to a manifest failure of will and would in my judgement be profoundly damaging to Alliance cohesion, credibility and security - and also to the prospect of real arms control. It could have a major impact on US-European relations.

I fear I cannot agree that to divide the two components of decisions now would amount to the same as is proposed in the integrated decision document. What that document envisages, in effect, is that we should take firm decisions now but should acknowledge that we shall be prepared to modify them later if the other side gives us solid and assured reasons for doing so. This is a fundamentally different political and negotiating proposition from the one which the CDA has indicated - it requires the Russians to react positively to our arms control initiative, rather than leaving the onus on the Alliance: that seems to me to be crucial. We must not set up a pattern in which the burden of fresh decisions lies always upon NATO. I would however be ready when we meet in Brussels on 10-12 December to consider with you whether there was any way in which we might help on presentation.

I believe we should remind ourselves of the reality of the Soviet position. Mr Brezhnev has offered nothing in relation to his own LRTNF programme except a general offer, without any detail of type or number, to withdraw some systems from Western Russia. But given the range of his systems, both old and new, he could easily fulfil such an offer without changing in the least the threat to NATO Europe. He has not offered in any way to halt his own programme, already larger and far more advanced than NATO's. (Indeed, as Mr Aaron reported to the Alliance on 28 November, the number of SS20 warheads alone deployed or being deployed, quite aside from other Soviet LRTN systems, already exceeds the total proposed Alliance programme.) He has not offered even a moratorium on his new deployments, still less on production. He says in effect "we will not stop our programme but you must not start yours: from those respective positions, we are prepared to talk with you". For my part, I would not be ready to negotiate anything with anyone on such a basis, in politics or my daily affairs.

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Those in my view are the central considerations: but let me mention two others. Firstly, I have every sympathy with Harold Brown's point that he cannot reasonably ask the US Congress to fund the provision of weapon systems for which his allies have not committed themselves even to accept deployment. This is reinforced by the fact that the US is taking a notably generous view financially of how to meet what is predominantly, in its HLG origins, a requirement driven by European views. Secondly, there is a real problem of preparation time. Procedures may be different in your country, but in the UK we must begin to take practical steps quite soon - within months - if we are to be ready for basing in 1983. It would be politically and practically impossible for me to embark on these steps if no clear deployment decision had been taken.

You raised also the question of numbers. This has always been a difficult matter, I agree, since the requirement has to be in the end a matter of informed judgement (not the same as a guess, of course) rather than of precise calculation. Any of us might no doubt have reached a rather different judgement. But for my part I regard the figure of 572 as quite reasonable, and I certainly see no significantly lower figure that could be shown to be markedly better based. (The military authorities, as you know, would have preferred a higher one, and even if in the end the programme has to be fully implemented our LRTNF strength will still be much smaller than its Soviet counterpart.) The figure is now firmly in the public domain, and to cut it would offer no improvement in security, in Alliance credibility, or in arms control prospects - if anything rather the reverse in this last respect. No great financial saving would accrue to any of the basing countries. My own country has already and would continue to have based in it a larger number of LRTNF than any other: yet we seek no reduction now. As to the idea of taking a lower figure and being ready to increase it if arms control fails, I disagree with this fundamentally as a matter of commonsense negotiating strategy. It would place the onus upon NATO to make a fresh judgement, possibly in confused and difficult political circumstances: whereas I endorse the view of almost all those who have experience in arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union that the only way to get good results is to make clear that they cannot secure outcomes they want without moving themselves. I do not accept the view that to start with one's full requirement is to assume the failure of arms control: I believe rather that to assume its success prematurely is a very likely way to bring about such failure.

There are a few other general points I should like to make. The concept of the nuclear threshold is of concern to many in our countries. I do not think it has yet been sufficiently understood that the present programme would actually help to raise that threshold. It would, by reducing the pre-launch vulnerability of NATO's land-based LRTNF, reduce the temptation to an adversary to mount a pre-emptive nuclear strike; and it would help release dual-capable aircraft from nuclear assignments like QRA, in order to reinforce conventional strength. These seem to me significant positive factors.

Finally, I know it is common ground between us that we should ultimately view this in the context of the Alliance which is so vital to us all. The Alliance's collective planning is evolved through

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careful discussion and debate, in which we all argue our points: we prevail on some, we concede on others. The LRTNF work has been a thorough and admirable exercise of precisely this kind. My country has influenced the outcome: so, very clearly, has the Netherlands - the package before us in December will bear your positive imprint in many ways (the emphasis on arms control, no increase in stockpile, the concept of the "shift" study and a firm date for it, just to take some examples). Not every aspect is precisely as you would wish, or indeed as the UK would. At the end of the day, we each of us have to take our national decisions. We must consider whether it is better for our own and Western security for each of us to be perfectly right (as we see it) in isolation, or to be perhaps imperfectly right together. The Alliance is built on the principle that the latter is better. The Government of which I am a member is determined to go ahead on that view. The practical implications are at least as heavy for us nationally as for other Europeans. But the British Government regards this as a major Alliance issue which we should approach above all as Alliance members. We earnestly hope that our friends - and particularly the Netherlands, which has been our partner in so much - will do the same.

TEXT OF MESSAGE FROM SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE TO THE NETHERLANDS MINISTER OF DEFENCE

I thought it might be helpful, given the especially private basis on which you disclosed to me the ideas you were considering for adjustments in Netherlands nuclear roles, if I replied to you on these separately from my more general comments on the LRTNF issue.

Let me first say that I am most appreciative that you have taken me so fully into your confidence on all this.

I ought to preface my specific comments by three points. Firstly, I assume throughout that any adjustments would be made essentially to complement an affirmative Netherlands decision to participate in LRTNF on the basis of the HLG programme. Secondly, I would even on that assumption still have preferred that your decisions on the precise adjustments elsewhere should wait, as would seem to me logical, upon the outcome of the NATO "shift" study to which you yourselves rightly attach considerable significance. I offer comments in advance of that collective work with some reluctance. Thirdly, I would regard the views of the NATO military authorities as of great importance: and I hope they may have an opportunity to give their own professional advice.

With these provisos, I offer the following:

(a) I would not seek to dissuade you from relinquishing the atomic demolition munitions role.

(b) Similarly, we would not regard as seriously damaging your giving up nuclear capability in surface-to-air missiles.

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(c) We do see considerable value, on present evidence, in your retaining an artillery capability, and I am glad to understand that you envisage no decisions on this in advance of the "shift" study.

(d) We should be extremely sorry to see you give up the nuclear role for your MPA aircraft. The weapons are now stored in the UK, and we are content to continue this arrangement. The NATO maritime authorities, and our own, would be concerned about any reduction in the span and flexibility of Alliance maritime nuclear capability, which is already far from ample. And your withdrawal would sharply narrow the breadth of Alliance participation in this field.

(e) We believe that there is both military and political value in maintaining dual capability for aircraft on a broad basis of Alliance participation, and Saceur has already expressed concern about the dwindling stocks of dual-capable aircraft at his disposal. We recognise however the argument in the HLG report that new LRTNF will make it easier to apply dual-capable aircraft effort in the conventional role. Against this background we would regard a Netherlands decision on the basis you described to me - that is, in parallel with GLCM deployment - to withdraw progressively from this area of effort in respect of your F.16s as less damaging than reductions in artillery or MPA.

I hope these indications of the UK standpoint - which I have approached in the desire to be as constructively helpful as I possibly can in your difficult circumstances - will be of value to you in reaching your decisions.

If you felt that an Alliance agreement in December on a positive statement

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about adjustments in the Netherlands nuclear role would be of sufficient importance to you to enable the Netherlands to participate in the TNF modernisation programme, I can give you my personal assurance that to the extent I have described above we would not seek to stand in your way. I hope, though, that you would agree not to let this become known until we achieve agreement in December on this and the many other issues we have to settle. But these private indications may perhaps help you in framing your tactics for your parliamentary debate next week.