



Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence: Nuclear non-proliferation treaty and nuclear disarmament

Wednesday 27 February 2019

11.35 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (The Chairman); Baroness Anelay of St Johns; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 16

Heard in Public

Questions 144 - 151

Witness

I: Bert Koenders, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of the Netherlands.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Bert Koenders.

Q144 **The Chairman:** Minister Koenders, good morning. We are very pleased that you have been able to join us today. We are very much looking forward to hearing your views on issues in which you have been a central player and will no doubt continue to be so. In particular, as you will have heard from the previous evidence, we are concerned with the future RevCon, but it is much more the general ambience in which nuclear disarmament negotiations, and indeed arms control generally, are proceeding in an extremely disturbed world. We would greatly value your overview of what lies ahead.

I should remind you formally that this is a televised session. There is a transcript. If you need to alter it afterwards if it does not reflect what you have said, you can do that. I remind my colleagues to declare any interests when they talk.

I begin with a fairly general question. Where are we on the risk of nuclear weapons use? We have heard the suggestion of a blurring between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons in the minds of the Russians. We have seen the INF¹ being undone on both sides. We have seen the proliferation and multi-polarity issues.

Would you give us from your experience, and from your important national role as Minister of Foreign Affairs of your country, your assessment of the rather gloomy statement that we are in for a new arms race? Are we really?

Bert Koenders: Thank you very much, Lord Chairman. It is a great honour and pleasure to be here with you in the House of Lords to give evidence on what has again become one of the most pressing issues for all of us, which is how we proceed with supporting, sustaining and strengthening the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the conference that takes place next year. The hallmark of this international treaty on security was the bargain between the haves and the have-nots, it is crucial to determine its continued relevance and how it impinges on our world. In the context of the insecurities that you mentioned, and the future of this idea that we still all have of a global zero and nuclear disarmament.

When I came into the room, you were talking about the Cold War. This whole issue of nuclear weapons and disarmament comes back with a vengeance to all of us. I sensed that also when I was the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Netherlands. The actuality is clear; we deal with this issue every day right now—for example, in the JCPOA.² I came back yesterday from a meeting with Chinese, Russians, Americans and Europeans on the tension around Iran and the need to get at least some element of consensus-building around it.

¹ The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty

² The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal)

We know that this is very difficult. We have a problem not only of unpredictability but of revisionist powers. To a certain extent, we also have 'big-man politics', which makes it more difficult to support and sustain negotiations. We see that today in North Korea, where I hope the diplomacy, which is very necessary, and the end of testing that we have seen are accompanied by something referred to in your earlier session: recognition of the importance of the global situation and the regional, Asian situation combined with verification.

I have quite a few introductory remarks, but it is better to go into your questions. The INF Treaty has not received sufficient attention from our political leadership in Europe and elsewhere. The political atmosphere is a little like, 'Well, this is going to be a lost treaty'. If we look at all these things in the context of nuclear proliferation, we see that a lot of things will have to happen. We saw the failure of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in 2015. I was there in 2005, and 2015, and one sees clearly that it is becoming increasingly difficult to move to consensus and to recognise the important role for discussions between the nuclear and non-nuclear states.

I know that you will have some questions for me on the nuclear Ban Treaty.³ My country is the only NATO member to engage in the talks, although we voted against the final treaty. It exemplifies two things. One is the enormous change that we see in technology and the way the world is organised. The second is the lack of political action to deal with it.

We have now not only bipolar but multipolar centres of gravity—China, India, North Korea and Pakistan, including the update of delivery systems. We also have the big risk of the nuclear threshold—I am very worried about that. We see at the moment a dangerous entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear systems, including a great risk of conventional prompt global strikes. There is at least a perception on the part of countries that such things might lead to the possibility of prompt global strikes, which increases the insecurities of all powers in different ways.

I want to underline from a more technical point of view the increasing risks posed by cyber weapons. They have an untested potential to corrupt states' early warning and command systems, including rising risks to nuclear weapons. If we want to set priorities, that is one of the first things I would look at.

I am sure that your Committee has also looked at the risk of shortened warning times because of the location of nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles or their modernisation close to the territory of somebody else. Therefore, the issue of communication channels becomes increasingly important. If I had a priority for the immediate future, it would be a communication channel between NATO allies and Russia—I know how difficult that is, but we have done it in the Cold War. The closeness around people in Russia makes it more difficult to have communication, but we need more than we have right now. The risk of miscalculation is

³ The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

high. We have talked about it for a long time, but it goes much further than, say, the de-escalation regime that we saw in Syria, which was useful but not sufficient. That is important as well.

On the political setting, I will not take too much time, because we could talk about it at great length, but I see an erosion of the arms control regimes, not only the INF Treaty but the risks to START.

In answering your questions, I can talk about preparation for the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference next year.

Furthermore I still think that there are some possibilities to work on the INF Treaty; I am not overly optimistic, but it should be done with some urgency. If we do not do that, I see again a risk of division in Europe, a division between Europe and the United States and a lack of competence and force in our multilateral negotiations.

I come from a much smaller nation, a nation that has the umbrella of nuclear weapons. We still have one nuclear task that depends on the United States: that is, whether the bombs in our planes should be modernised. At this stage, it is important that we have much more discussion among the P5, which is very difficult—you are a crucial element there; you are a crucial transatlantic link. Brexit or not, you are a key element in co-operation in Europe on security as well.

I would call for something that I think was mentioned by the ambassador in the previous evidence as well. In the face a lot of opposition from all my NATO partners, I was willing to engage in the nuclear ban talks. We can have big questions about the outcome—we voted against it—but such dialogue and regional discussion are important for transparency and cannot easily be left to go away. They are crucial for the success of the Review Conference next year.

There is much more to be said about all this, but I am happy to answer your questions if I can.

The Chairman: Thank you. You have opened a whole lot of issues and fascinating thoughts there.

Q145 **Baroness Coussins:** How would you assess the various risks of nuclear use that have been flagged up to us, as between mistaken use, accidental use and rogue use by non-state actors for example, and any other nuclear use that is not legitimate and intentional? Do different sorts of actions and systems need to be put in place to try to improve the security for each type of risk?

Bert Koenders: I think we have made some progress on the risk of the use of nuclear material by non-state actors. There is at least a large degree of consensus in the world that we have to stop that. Of course, there are rogue nations and issues that still make this a priority, but one of the few areas in which we can continue to re-enforce multilateral co-operation is in the nuclear security initiative started by President Obama and which has been continued.

I am not saying that there is not a risk; the risk is still there. This requires co-operation between our intelligence services, which has to be very precise. Of course, there are risks of certain countries possibly exporting material to other nations. In the context of what we have as a framework, we have to continue to work hard on this.

On the use and misuse of nuclear weapons, authorised and unauthorised, I think we all realise that there are different forms of this. My biggest worries by far are miscalculation, short warning times, and the blurring between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons.

I am worried—this may also be for the UK Government to discuss in the context of the modernisation of nuclear weapons, whatever your opinion might be on this—by the increased use, or mentioning of the use, or sabre-rattling around the use of nuclear weapons in defence strategies. We have seen that in the Russian Federation especially. It has some of the policies that I am very critical about. Its conventional/nuclear balance might be such that it at least hints at the early use of nuclear weapons to stop a possible conflict at an early stage. If that threshold has gone we have a major issue. Frankly, the nuclear threshold was not discussed so much in the discussions that I have seen in NATO, or at least not sufficiently.

Secondly, the nuclear threshold—the use of nuclear weapons in strategy—should be the first priority in the context of our responsibilities as NATO allies, where we look very critically at other players. The Russian Federation is one of the biggest concerns there.

So it is because of miscalculation and early warning times that we need communication channels. Again, it is difficult to see how that could work. We have been working in the European Leadership Network, where your colleague Des Browne, the Americans and the Russians are active. We have to deepen our efforts. Take the European context for a second, which is complex, because the real question is now how we deal with multilateral issues—with the Chinese, Indians and the Pakistanis and so on.

Your Committee might also look at what it thinks of the NATO-Russia Council and the extent to which it could be beefed up, and what the position of your Government is in this. I have been very critical of the Russian Federation, as you are here. We are close allies and we see very disturbing behaviour by the Russian Federation in its defence postures, in its sabre-rattling on the use of nuclear weapons, in its exercises, and especially in relation to Ukraine.

My feeling has always been, in the history of our alliance, the Harmel doctrine: we can have deterrence only if we also have dialogue, even if it is difficult, and we have to raise this above ambassadorial level and some of the exchanges between the military professionals that we have right now. I know it is very difficult, but this would be another priority.

In short, I do not think there will be the immediate use of nuclear weapons. Of course, there is still a deterrent nature to nuclear weapons, as we saw today. I hope that works, but the risks are high between India and Pakistan. At least the Pakistani Prime Minister seems to have said, 'Okay, we have to sit down'.

There is some deterrent effect, but, at the same time, in a dangerous world especially—a time of neo-nationalism, big-man politics and technology—communication channels and understanding the need to talk are crucial. We did it in the Cold War; we had many more contacts and we always made the link between strategic stability and arms control. The one might be a precondition for the other: we cannot have strategic stability if we do not talk, because the insecurity becomes so high around some of the technological developments that I mentioned.

Q146 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I should first declare an interest as a member of the European Leadership Network, to which you referred.

I will pick up a couple of references you made to the lack of discussions with the Russians and how this is very undesirable. The Committee shared that view in our last report on shifting power relationships, in which we suggested that in the area we are talking about today—arms control and nuclear weapons—it really is important to talk to the Russians. As a former Foreign Minister, could you tell us how we manage to achieve that without it looking like business as usual, which we are all very determined should not be the case so long as the Russians are doing what they are doing in Ukraine and Crimea?

Going on from that, and quite separately from it, the US Administration in at least two of its policy initiatives in recent times have cut across the views of their main European partners, including the United Kingdom. The first is when they pulled out of the Iran deal—the JCPOA—and the second is their decision to withdraw from the INF, to which you referred.

On the JCPOA, do you think the European policy of trying to sustain that agreement is the right one? Are we doing everything that we can or should be doing, if it is the right policy?

On the INF, could you suggest some ways the Europeans should enter the debate and what we should try to achieve in it? Is the INF Treaty as such saveable at all? If it is not, what sort of arrangements dealing with intermediate-range weapons in Europe could be an objective for Europeans? Is it possible to think of a regional approach to this and to avoid any new deployment of intermediate weapons on either side in Europe without the treaty? Perhaps you could speculate a little on that.

Bert Koenders: I very much appreciate your questions and the last element, because in a world of nuclear unpredictability there is a lot of speculations. So take my answers for what they are worth.

The first question is a very important one. I was Foreign Minister until the end of 2017. I was not part of the NATO meetings in 2018—I followed them, of course, carefully. What struck me in the period when I was Foreign Minister was that NATO stayed very unified on Russia. Sometimes

there was criticism that we divided ourselves, not only on the sanctions issue, which is more of a European and transatlantic issue, but on the basic issue of the need to answer conventionally within the limits of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, the enhanced activities in the Baltic states, strengthening deterrence and so on.

I was struck that we were more unified than it was sometimes said from the outside we were. There was a strong need to answer appropriately in a way that would not make us sleepwalk into a conflict, but to answer on the strength we have as NATO in co-operation, including on Article 5. I will leave the discussions on what we should do with cybersecurity in Article 5 and exactly how that works out for the Baltic states and so on, but that is point one.

Secondly, Ukraine was always the first point in all the meetings we had, and correctly so because the rules of the game were violated very strongly by the Russian Federation. You see that in this country with Skripal and all kinds of other activities. We need to be extremely vigilant in many areas, including hybrid warfare.

The questions remains how we deal with the dialogue aspect. When does something become business as usual? This was a debate in the NATO Council every time, and we got a bit stuck there. The majority of countries said, 'Yes, we will continue the military-political policy', which I just put the main emphasis on, but we need to talk about the things that we just mentioned; we cannot simply not talk to the Russians on issues that are in our interests, as we do on anti-terrorism, and as the US, not NATO, did in a military way, on the conflicting policies in Syria and so forth. That was my position and that of some important allies.

On business as usual, it is also in your own self-interest to keep talking especially about the big exercises that the Russian Federation was doing, the inspections, the risk of miscalculation in the air, and so forth. That should not inhibit us. It is not automatically business as usual to improve and increase those communication channels. I think we have failed so far, frankly.

I do not think there has been much except for a few meetings at ambassadorial level; I think there have been some talks between Gerasimov and SACEUR.⁴ But looking at the technological and political changes that we were talking about, that is simply not sufficient. It is not only NATO that is to blame; it is also very difficult on the other side. I mentioned the closed nature on all these issues at the moment. I think we have to pursue that in the interests of security in Europe and the Harmel doctrine.

Your second question was on the JCPOA. It is important to say that we are in a time of extreme polarisation in the world on the issue of Iran. The polarisation is understandable, looking at Iran's activities on ballistic missiles and human rights, and on its activities in Syria especially, but

⁴ The NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

also in Iraq. The JCPOA has taught us that—again, there is the question of whether it is business as usual or not—we live in a time when you also have to co-operate with countries with which you are in conflict. You have to delineate what you co-operate on, how and when, and what you remain in substantial conflict on.

In my view, the new US Administration has taken a very wrong decision on this. It was important to isolate the nuclear issue. Even after this happened, there were negotiations to try at least to involve some of these other issues after the JCPOA, but again the American Administration were not willing to engage on this.

I am a defender of the JCPOA. Whether it will remain is an enormous battle to be played out in Iran, with the whole position of the Foreign Minister, who is the icon of this agreement, and whether it can get and keep support between hard and soft liners, if you will, in Iran—and, of course, in Europe and the United States.

Of course, the vehicle we have is weak; most of the countries do not invest much in Iran right now. Obviously the dollar plays a role in this, but we still have to diplomatically—and, where we can, economically—beef up this vehicle, because otherwise there will be another undermining of a multilateral treaty. You cannot simply say from one day to another that you will give it up, even if you are a subsequent Administration. It is risky, and it is a signal, if you want to get agreements with other countries, including North Korea, which is already much further along in the nuclear weapons issue.

The INF is the most difficult question by far. Frankly, the future looks grim; you did not say that, but I think that is the case. My feeling—it is no more than that—is that Washington seems uninterested in preserving the treaty. The same might be true of the Russian Federation, to a certain extent. It might give both sides a certain free hand, in view of some of the other challenges that they see in the world, including in China.

Therefore, there is a serious risk to the INF Treaty. I think there is a two-track approach, for what it is worth—for two reasons: not only because of the need for nuclear security and European security but to ensure that Europe is not caught in the middle again in transatlantic relations or in intra-European divisions, which we already see on this. In my country in the 1970s, we had the biggest crisis—the nuclear missile crisis, with the issue of the Pershings and the SS20s. In the end, that led to the INF Treaty. I am sure that there will be enormous divisions in Europe about mirroring and installing ground-based nuclear weapons in Europe.

What should we do about this? First, I am a bit sceptical about what we could still do with the present INF Treaty. However, as NATO said, the Russians' 9M729 missiles are a concern and require verification and inspection. I think it would be wise, although I do not know if it will happen, for the Pentagon to explore addressing some of Russia's concerns about the so-called Aegis Ashore Missile Defense System in

Romania, which is perceived by them—rightly or wrongly; I will leave that for what it is—as creating the possibility of short or mid-range ballistic missiles being targeted at Russia.

There is the need for transparency and verification. In any case, these two elements could lead to options where both sides ensure compliance via mutual inspections. Again, I am not overly optimistic on this, but it is one way at least that we should pursue and which we have not pursued up to now. It is as if people have given up on the INF and nobody is doing much, because of transatlantic relations and relations in the wider world. It is a signal if the demise of the INF Treaty is simply seen as unavoidable. I do not know why, really.

The second possibility is what you can do if this does not work, but I will go back to the first element before I come to the second. I was talking about the 1980s and what happened then that is different from now and allowed us to get to the INF. First, there was transatlantic consultation. The European countries set up the high-level group, which was about the terms and strategic stability. With the SS20s, we asked what the gap for us was, and the risk to our security. 'Should it be filled? Is it decoupling us from the United States, or coupling us with it?' There was a discussion about the figures. If you had too many, the idea was that the Americans could limit a nuclear war to Europe. If you did not have enough, the Americans might not fight for Europe. The debate at that time went a bit like that.

Under pressure from the Europeans, NATO set up two things. First, it set up a high-level group to discuss this exact issue: the extent to which these Russian ballistic missiles are a risk to us, if they are there and that is verified. 'Do we need new answers, or do we have sufficient answers in the other redundant nuclear weapons that we have? Would it require a certain answer, and is that necessarily something on the ground? That does not look likely'. That was a key element in the discussion: strategic stability.

At the same time, a group of experts was working in parallel on arms control. If we look at the answer, it is not clear whether we should answer in one way or another; in my view, we should definitely not mirror what the Russians are doing, as that is a somewhat ignorant logic. Instead, we should look at arms control on the other side. That is what NATO did in the 1980s, and in the end under the leadership of President Reagan it led unexpectedly to the INF Treaty. That is interesting, because the SS20s were seen as being targeted on Europe as well, and we were in favour of the zero option. Those other nuclear weapons could of course still be targeted at Europe.

I would plead for that approach in the first instance. Frankly, I am not sure that it will happen, in view of the transatlantic relations, but let us be politicians. Nothing is preordained, and the passivity on this, in my view, is much worse.

But what if it does not work, which is not unlikely given the unwillingness on some sides to continue seeing this as part of nuclear modernisation processes and nuclear posture revisions?

There are two possibilities. The Germans have been the most opposed to an answer on the ground to the perceived threats from the Russian Federation if they are verified, but if one had to be given it could be that we suggest the prohibition of sub-strategic weapons in Europe—an INF 2, I guess, although there is not so much clarity on that from the Germans, who have been relatively silent on this because they are in a complex coalition. Again, I do not know, they might be divided on this.

The second possibility, if you do not do that, is to talk about geographical limitations. I think the Foreign Minister of Germany has spoken about that. I have some doubts about it, because it is not easy technically. These systems are mobile, so you can place them elsewhere.

The biggest challenge we have is to multilateralise this. Whatever we say about emerging technologies, the risk of the use of nuclear weapons and the risk reduction that we need, and the way we need to show non-nuclear states that we are serious about all this if we want to succeed next year, the alternative is to do what we have to do in many policy areas in a world of shifting power with different, complex interests: multilateralise the issue of ballistic missiles.

That requires something that I do not think we can do in the short term as a solution to the INF Treaty, but here the role of the P5 is crucial. I know there are differences and the United States' whole game with China. We will see how that works out; Russia also feels vulnerable to it. If we involve China, if it is willing to do this, we then have the issue of Pakistan and India. You can make it as complex as you wish.

My view, without any naivety, is that this is the way to go. Maybe the United Kingdom, as one of the P5, could play a role or develop ideas. Otherwise we basically let INF go. I am not convinced that if the INF goes, START goes as well, but it is definitely not unlikely. Then we have some risks of further erosion of nuclear non-proliferation regimes. We have to be very careful about that in view of the world we are living in.

Q147 Lord Grocott: Your reference to the differences between now and the 1980s, which I listened to with interest, was understandably, in the context of the question, on the different Western perspective of the closer attachment between North America and Europe at that time.

Surely it is important to look at the colossal difference from the perspective of someone sitting in Moscow. The change was spectacular, to anyone of my generation, at any rate, brought up in the coldest period of the Cold War. Suddenly the Warsaw Pact dissolved and NATO moved spectacularly to the east. I can barely believe it even now when I say it, but Albania is now a member of NATO. If you had said that was a possibility 20-odd years ago, people with white coats would have come in and checked you. That is what has happened.

Surely if we do not understand that colossal change from the Russian perspective, a change that we have almost absorbed as the new norm, we have not got past first base. The extent to which we can accommodate its anxieties is a matter of debate, but the fact the anxieties exist is surely utterly understandable.

Bert Koenders: I agree. You are right: I made a connection with the 1980s as a way to look at answers in the transatlantic alliance that do not simply mirror what we think the Russians are doing but see to what extent we can link that to sensible common security and strategic stability for both sides. I am hesitant to use the words, maybe for the reasons that you referred to. I still do not think that we are back in a cold war. We should not go back to that logic.

The nuclear posture that I have seen, with the modernisation plans in the US and the push that I have sensed in NATO to mirror automatically what we presume the Russians are doing, is a mistake, in my view. That is why I am in favour of communication and understanding where the Russian side is coming from. We have to delink some of the policies and problems that we have with the Russian Federation on Ukraine and hybrid warfare.

On NATO enlargement, understanding where Russia is coming from is an eternal debate. I am sure that you have different positions here as well. I always believe that you have to understand that, in a nuclear age, a nuclear war can and should never be fought. We know that. But we have to understand where the other side comes from and what its politics are. We have to be vigilant. This is a hard world these days.

The Russian Federation seems very willing, for reasons of its conventional forces, to look at the early use of nuclear weapons. It is saying that openly; we cannot just deny it and stay where we were. I feel that NATO enlargement has been a free choice on the part of countries that have been democratically chosen for this. That does not take away the fact that I understand the psychology of this very well. We live in a world where we have to work on that. That is why I am a proponent of the United Kingdom and Russia and the others in the P5 looking at their responsibilities.

Q148 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Good afternoon, Mr Koenders. I would like to return to the position of the Netherlands on the Ban Treaty. You mentioned that even entering into the early stages of discussions and negotiations of it met with a response from other NATO members. I was interested in your comment on that.

Correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding from reading the explanation of the vote is that there was a clear stance in the Netherlands parliament that the Government would enter into negotiations first, but that because the text of the treaty would be contrary to NATO membership they could not support it. Why did the Netherlands vote against rather than abstain like other NATO members?

I am interested in another comment in the explanation of the vote: 'We plan ... to explore how we can restore a shared sense of purpose to the

disarmament and non-proliferation regime'. Secondly, it says, very interestingly: 'we would have liked to see more ambition reflected in its provisions'. Could you explain what level of ambition there could have been in the provisions, but clearly not contrary to the provisions of NATO membership? What ground would the Netherlands have been satisfied with?

Bert Koenders: To be honest, sir, the position I have taken in this debate on the nuclear Ban Treaty has not been an easy one. It has been criticised left and right and I am still convinced that we did the right thing. The Netherlands has always been a member of NATO. We are part of the umbrella. But historically and in my own political life I have felt that the Non-Proliferation Treaty is the hallmark treaty that we have, and that although we have made major progress in the reduction of the number of nuclear weapons to 15,000, it is still enormous. The non-nuclear states have not been taken very seriously by the nuclear states—in any form whatever. We are still happy that we have only nine countries with nuclear weapons, although it is still too many. It could have been much more—look at Libya, Kazakhstan, South Africa. This is an important treaty.

My Government have always gone to the limit with countries that have no nuclear weapons, and have very fair points. In 2005, I was at the disastrous meeting in New York of the non-proliferation Review Conference. In 2010, we agreed on 13 points of implementation and not much happened. Frankly, that is the responsibility of the nuclear states. Of course, they have different interests among themselves, but I leave that for what it is.

The inspiration that came from the landmine treaty and the chemical weapons treaty gave a lot of countries the very sensible view that if Article 6 of the NPT was not leading to what we expect the nuclear states to do but instead to their modernising their postures and eroding arms control regimes, we had to work with them. That was my conviction.

In itself, the idea of trying to strengthen Article 6 also through a strategy that could lead to a nuclear ban should be pursued and discussed with them. After all, we need a consensus in the world. We can continue with this division, but we have to stretch our hands out, and do that seriously.

The opposition from my NATO colleagues was virulent. We were the only ones. I have had many countries coming to me, saying, 'You cannot go into this. It's not in agreement with your NATO responsibilities', which I would like to underline the Netherlands takes very seriously; it is in most of the international missions, from Afghanistan to elsewhere. So I was not totally convinced of the need to take such a brusque view; we are talking about 117 countries, or something like that, which are in the process of ratification. There is a reason why.

Also, I was not naive about the fact that these negotiations could lead to further opposition between two groups of nations, which would not be productive. A bridge is always difficult, because if you have different

interests it is not easy to see where it will go, and we are not the biggest country around, either.

We have negotiated in good faith. I found the negotiations extremely difficult, because they took the position more and more—perhaps as a reaction to the harsh position of the nuclear states—of not looking at key issues brought in by the Netherlands, and by other countries: Sweden is not a NATO country, but it may look to gain NATO membership at some point, I do not know. They are considering if the Nuclear Ban Treaty is helping in this, or not?

There were a few things that I really disagreed with; this is also in our statement. That is why we voted against. First of all because of verification. Verification is key. You might even go one step backwards. I do not know why it was so difficult for some countries to go further with this. You must make that a cornerstone, even if you differ among yourselves—this is a group of 117 countries, after all—because this is key. I found that the most difficult part of it.

Secondly, there was never a time element. We have brought that in. If you are organising a meeting, and the nuclear states do not want to participate, and actually you do not want them with you either, that in the end does not lead to success. So with some other countries we tried at least to put in a time element. Yes, we are part of a nuclear alliance, as long as nuclear weapons exist, but you need a time element to get rid of it; otherwise, if we signed it and voted yes, it would be immediately illegal.

That would be impossible. We did not get sufficient room for manoeuvre in that context to put any of these time elements in. Quite a few countries were willing to do so, but the majority were against it. In the nuclear ban negotiations, things are allowed on the basis of simple majorities.

In the context of our nuclear responsibilities—we are willing to go to global zero—neither the time element nor the verification was very convincing, in my view, and the negotiations were very sloppy. In the beginning, there was such speed on this, which I do not think was necessary. A lot of the legal terms are simply not well defined. You might think that this is a detail, but it is not. When we talk about nuclear weapons—verification, nuclear umbrellas, responsibilities, testing—we have to be very precise. It was impossible to vote, from my point of view, and the point of view of the Dutch Government.

You could say, 'Look, you were part of the negotiations, but you voted no in the end, so what changed?' Not much changed, but if we continue to be so strongly opposed to bridge-building, from the NATO side as well as from the other side, that is not good. We will lose more and more countries. We had the middle powers initiative at the beginning of this millennium for countries that want productively to build bridges, but I see them moving to a more extreme side.

Let me give two examples of things that could help with confidence building: first, strengthening the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, which is already active on some of the North Korea issues; and, secondly, the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty. I would love it if the United Kingdom, together with Germany, the Netherlands and Canada, would support the speeding up of this, because that might be a major confidence-building measure. It is clearly another way of stopping, or at least limiting, this modernisation process, which goes counter to the wishes of so many.

Q149 The Chairman: Another treaty, START, runs out in 2021 and we will need a new one. While we are talking about these treaty prospects, what do you think about that?

Bert Koenders: Frankly, I think it is a different treaty. My fear is that if we do not work on the INF now by being more active politically on the present possibilities or trying to work on medium-range ballistic missiles in a multilateral room, it will speed up the logic of giving up START, which would then look very likely. It looks very likely anyway. I am against it, because I think that the erosion of the arms regime is the worst thing we can do right now, for all the reasons I mentioned. We need a lot of political pressure to work on different parties to contain this, but I am not very optimistic about it, frankly.

Q150 Baroness Anelay of St Johns: I would like to ask two questions about NATO's role in nuclear diplomacy. This is a theme that has been running underneath all the questions so far, so I would like to pinpoint two questions.

The first regards what actions the Alliance could take collectively to reduce nuclear risk. I appreciate that you have already referred to the importance of communication channels between NATO and Russia, and you have mentioned the NATO-Russia Council. You might want to develop that further, or perhaps there are other steps that NATO allies could take.

Secondly—this relates specifically to your position as a citizen of the Netherlands and your having been a Foreign Minister there—to what extent do you think the perspectives of Allies participating in nuclear sharing might differ from those of other NATO Allies? In asking those questions, like Lord Hannay I should declare an interest as a member of the European Leadership Network, to which you referred.

Bert Koenders: Let me start with the first question. This is a risky remark, because I do not like the word 'politicisation', but I do not know a better one, maybe because of my English. We need to make issues relating to nuclear reviews in the US or NATO a bit more transparent and political. I think that is possible. Of course, there is a lot of secrecy around this, and you do not put everything on the table. That is logical.

However, I feel very much that this has become depoliticised in my time. It is no longer an issue of serious consultation with NATO. What is strategic stability right now? How do we deal with this in a time of completely different geopolitical and technological circumstances? We just

have to. It is partly about the past and partly about the modernisation of individual countries. I am not sure that in the end that is good enough. That is a very general answer. I realise that.

Secondly, there are of course quite a few things that we can be more transparent about. It is still not possible for me to say whether and if so where my country has nuclear weapons or not, or in which way we have this umbrella situation or not, simply because it is confidential. I could not say this to my parliament; it has instructed me to discuss this with all the Allies and be open about the facts. Which I think should be done from the democratic point of view. But I cannot do it, I have not done it, and I will not do it today. But I think it is silly; it does not help our security in any way, let me tell you that. I do not know any serious analysis that says that transparency on this would reduce our international security.

I said something about issues that we need to work much more on immediately in NATO. In my view, that is the issue of the role of nuclear weapons in our strategies and the reduction of that, which is one of the promises that we made at the 2010 NPT conference. The two elements that first require our attention—I think I mentioned them already—are cybersecurity and nuclear installations. I cannot judge the risk, but according to experts it requires attention. We talk about cybersecurity in relation to energy, communications, infrastructure, hospitals, and sometimes what we see in our political arena. When it comes to the risks to very well-protected nuclear systems, it is even more important to do this.

It is important that we go back to ideas that can create this discussion in NATO on the relationship between strategic stability and arms control by de-targeting and creating a little more time for decision-making and increasing the security of launching systems. These things are not a great part of the political debate. I do not mean party-political, everyday debate, but one substantiated in a NATO dialogue, including raising the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. These are the most important issues on the nuclear front.

I cannot say that much about the umbrella, except that this discussion will come up. What is public is that five nations, including Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, relate to American nuclear bombs as part of the strategy. The question will be this. In the context of the INF, will there be a modernised nuclear bomb in the modernisation plans? Under the modernisation plans, the Netherlands is getting F35s, for example.

That debate will be had on different sides of the political spectrum. There will be those who will say that we do not need this modernisation at all and let us not have it. In this case, I am on that side, but there are two other views. One is that we should do it anyway, because we had it and it is simply modernisation, so there is nothing new about it, and why should we change it the moment that the other side does things we do not like?

The second is that if we have a perceived or real threat under these new systems from the Russian Federation, it is better to have them than on

planes than as a ground-launched ballistic system, and that this might be a way to keep the nuclear sharing between the United States and Europe. Of course, there have been some very initial discussions in the media on a Euro-deterrent. You probably followed that: because of the state of the transatlantic relationships, maybe there should be a Euro-deterrent when Article 5 is under discussion.

This is an old debate that I always find very risky. Those against it will plead for nuclear sharing and modernisation. This part of the debate will come up around the end of the INF Treaty. The answer will be based on whether it is necessary, whether we necessarily need to mirror and whether we do so on the ground, or whether we can negotiate this away in another forum.

Q151 The Chairman: Minister, you are sitting here in London and we have certain preoccupations, as you know, with our European friends. What action would you recommend as a friend that the UK should pursue in the forthcoming RevCon and the whole non-proliferation scene? In addition, do you also expect a collective voice for NATO on this issue, presumably through the Secretariat?

Bert Koenders: I am sorry, I did not get the last part of your question.

The Chairman: Does the NATO Secretariat have an organised voice and input into the RevCon?

Bert Koenders: To be honest, I cannot answer the last question simply because I am not in office anymore and I have not followed it. It normally does not as it is a matter for member states, but sometimes it is negotiated in the EU framework. I doubt it is wise to do that, because it is very difficult to get agreement on this. My answer has a lot of limitations, because I simply am not aware of what is happening exactly on that front right now, since I have been too long out of what happens in NATO.

May I make one general remark, because today you are also discussing other issues in the UK? It is very important, whatever your decisions are on Brexit and the future, that the United Kingdom remains part of this discussion in a European context. I am convinced that you will, but it is important to underline that whatever the views are here—I definitely do not want to get into that—this issue of our common security, our arrangements in defence co-operation, our visions for arms control, and the United Kingdom's role as a Security Council member, one of the P5 and a nuclear power is absolutely crucial.

That is why I hope that, in some of the discussions we will have in the coming months in preparation on nuclear non-proliferation but also on the INF, the United Kingdom link transatlantically, as well as with European partners, could be key, if it is proactive. The problem, not just with the UK but with all of us, is that we have so many internal issues. I see in general that Europe, and to a certain extent the UK, is absent from an enormous amount of the discussions at the moment when it comes to global security. It is a bit frightening. It goes outside the discussion of

Brexit, but there is the weakness on foreign relations of the European Council and the lack of any coherent vision on our security. We leave it to others who take the initiative.

Let me mention just a few points that I think are important. The first is to try to make the link with the non-nuclear states. It will be a difficult relationship, but it is important to do so. See to what extent you could be part of the discussions that are now going on with some European allies on promoting the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which is very important, including on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization. These are things that simply help to build confidence.

Let us be very active as Europeans—I mean as NATO Europeans—in how we make this consultative mechanism, how we deal with short-ranged ballistic missiles, and how you can be instrumental as a key component in the P5 to get the discussion going. In the preparation, it is important to be transparent, to have all these regional sessions, and to take others seriously in the debate.

My fear is not necessarily a repeat of 2015, in which the UK, Canada and the US could not agree on the outcome of the Review Conference. I hope that we do not get into that discussion, when it is a discussion on the real issues of nuclear safety and the risks that we have in this work.

The Chairman: Minister, you have been very frank and your views are very valuable to us. I thought while you were speaking that with America going we are not quite sure where, and the Russians still playing the Putin game for the moment, perhaps we have to invent new forums, regardless of the Brexit issue, to carry on really close focus and dialogue on all these issues, day and night, continuously. That is a story for the future. Thank you very much indeed for being with us. We are most grateful to you. It has been a great help.

Bert Koenders: Thank you. It has been an honour to be with you. I wish you all the best in your work.