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Central Intelligence Agency



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The Netherlands: Election Politics and Prospects for INF Deployment

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Summary

Ratification of the US-Dutch basing agreement by the lower house of parliament has removed another obstacle in the path of INF deployment, but actual emplacement of the missiles remains in doubt. If the Labor Party enters government after the election in May--which polls suggest remains a possibility--it almost certainly will try to revise the INF decision. Deployment is not completely assured even if the current center-right government remains in power. The Dutch are not scheduled to deploy cruise missiles until 1988, leaving ample time for new events--such as an attractive Soviet arms control offer--to emerge as an excuse for delay.

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Preelection Outlook

The opposition Labor Party undoubtedly will make INF a principal issue in May's election, but it faces a difficult battle in dislodging the Christian Democratic-Liberal coalition that has held power for all but two of the past eight years. A public opinion survey in January showed that the coalition would at that time receive 76 out of 150 seats in the Second Chamber of Parliament, compared to 58 seats for the Labor Party. The survey

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of European Analysis. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to [redacted] Chief, West European Division [redacted]

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results suggest that the government's decision in November to go ahead with deployment did little damage to its electoral standing and that the importance of INF as a public issue is declining. Although polls show a majority of Dutchmen continue to oppose cruise missile deployment, a survey last fall revealed that "disarmament" was no longer among the top ten policy issues for voters. Even prominent peace movement leaders have acknowledged to US officials that popular interest in INF is waning. [redacted]

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The government is also benefitting from an upswing in the economy and from the Labor Party's inability to overcome intra-party strife and develop an effective alternative economic program. Moreover, Labor's aging candidate for Prime Minister, Joop den Uyl, has far less voter appeal than energetic Christian Democratic Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers. Indeed, Christian Democratic strategists have told US officials a key to the campaign will be contrasting Lubbers with "yesterday's man," den Uyl.* A strategy of emphasizing a popular incumbent worked for Prime Minister Martens in Belgium last year, and Dutch Christian Democrats are counting on the same thing. [redacted]

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The government's currently favorable standing in opinion polls could still decline, however, as a result of the increasingly bitter dispute between the coalition partners over euthanasia and budget issues. A vigorous campaign by the opposition for dual control of cruise missiles based in the Netherlands--a demand rejected by the government but shared by many leftwing Christian Democrats--could also divide the coalition.** [redacted]

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To maintain its electoral edge, the center-right coalition is anxious to avoid any issues that might revive peace movement activity. Dutch officials, according to US diplomats, are concerned that Washington might stir controversy by announcing a less strict interpretation of the ABM and SALT II treaties. Foreign Minister van den Broek, in a recent meeting with US

*Den Uyl apparently recognizes this problem, and recently hinted he will step down as Labor leader sometime after the election even if the party reenters the government. [redacted]


**Provincial elections on 19 March will be an important preelection test of the government's voting strength. In 1982, these elections accurately predicted the victory for the Christian Democrats and Liberals in the parliamentary election. [redacted]

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officials, emphasized that "further abrogation" of SALT II would have drastic consequences for Dutch public opinion. In our view, this wariness about voter reaction also probably means the Dutch government will not sign an agreement with Washington on SDI before the election. 


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Implications of Different Election Outcomes for INF

If the Christian Democrats and Liberals receive slightly less than a majority of seats in the next election--say between 70 and 75 seats--they probably will initially try to enlist support from the small left-of-center Democrats '66 (D'66) Party. Although the D'66 is ideologically closer to the Labor Party, party leader Hans van Mierlo may agree to collaborate with the Christian Democrats and Liberals in exchange for concessions on economic and social issues, such as higher public expenditures for low-income groups. 

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The D'66 has opposed INF in the past, but a recent party congress decided not to demand cancellation of the US-Dutch basing accord once it was approved by parliament. D'66 leaders did, however, make clear that they would try to renegotiate unspecified parts of the INF agreement with Washington. D'66 acquiescence in INF in any case will continue to depend almost entirely on the personal views of Van Mierlo, who holds a dominant position in the party. The party relies on him to restore lost popularity and appears ready to go along with his views on INF. Should Van Mierlo become more hostile to deployment, D'66 would quickly reverse its more accommodating stand. 

If the D'66 refuses to participate in a center-right government, Lubbers might turn to the small rightwing religious parties--such as the Reformed Political Federation or the Reformed Union--that are likely to win about 9 seats. Even though these parties are basically in tune with the current government on INF, they probably would not consider a coalition with the Christian Democrats and Liberals if the latter continue to press for legalization of euthanasia--a policy morally unacceptable to the small religious parties. 

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If the center-right total falls below 70 seats, we think the Christian Democrats will find it very hard to avoid a coalition with Labor. In the post-election coalition-building negotiations -- and after formation of a new cabinet--the Labor Party probably would try to make good its pledge to reverse the INF

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basing agreement.* The Christian Democrats almost certainly would reject demands for unilateral abrogation of the basing accord, but leftwing Christian Democrats might support renegotiation of the agreement, especially on questions of command and control of cruise missiles. Although most leftwing Christian Democrats have not openly challenged the party leadership's position that Dutch sharing in the control of INF missiles is unnecessary, [redacted] there is considerable sympathy for "dual key" control of INF based in the Netherlands. Defense Minister De Ruiter, for example, has consistently argued for a more explicit Dutch role in command and control. [redacted]

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Prime Minister Lubbers--who probably would head a Christian Democratic-Labor coalition--almost certainly would try to fend off leftist pressure for renegotiation of the US-Dutch agreement by offering concessions on some social and economic issues, but we doubt that Labor could ever be induced to endorse deployment unconditionally--Labor's current identity is tied too closely to opposition to INF. If forced to govern with the Labor Party, Lubbers might ask Washington to agree to some change in the agreement--for example, reducing the period after which the INF accord can be reviewed from five years to a shorter period. Lubbers might also try to deflect pressure to backtrack on deployment by agreeing to review the decision only if the Soviet SS-20 total dropped below 378--the ceiling Lubbers set in 1984 as a condition for forgoing deployment in the Netherlands. If Washington refused to make concessions, Lubbers might then try to placate Labor and the leftwing of his own party by stalling on the implementation of the cruise missile agreement. [redacted]

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Alternatively, Lubbers might try to win support from the Christian Democratic leadership for withdrawing from coalition with Labor and calling for a new election by emphasizing Labor's inflexibility and anti-NATO stance. Lubbers presumably would calculate that a new election could return the Christian Democrats and Liberals to power because of the voters' desire for governmental stability and realization that center-left coalitions are inherently unstable. [redacted]

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*During parliamentary ratification debates, Labor spokesman cited changes in the US-Dutch tax treaty by Congress as justification for unilateral abrogation of the INF accord by a new Dutch government. We doubt the Council of State, which would rule on the legality of abrogation, would accept Labor's stand. [redacted]

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Arms Control Temptations

We believe INF deployment is not completely certain even if the present center-right coalition is reelected. An attractive Soviet arms control proposal, for example, always has the potential to revive anti-INF sentiment among leftwing Christian Democrats--who may again hold the balance of power in parliament if the center-right returns with only a small majority--and increase public pressure on the government to delay cruise missile deployment. [redacted]

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Thus far, The Hague's reaction to Gorbachev's most recent proposal has been cautious. The government has emphasized that new elements in the Soviets' position deserve careful analysis in NATO forums, but it rejected opposition demands to postpone ratification of the INF basing agreement. Nevertheless, we believe Lubbers continues to hope for an interim accord on INF before 1988 which could make Dutch cruise missile deployment unnecessary. During his visit to Moscow this spring he may probe Soviet flexibility on INF despite repeated assurances by The Hague to US officials that the Dutch deployment decision would not be discussed. If the Soviets hinted that new concessions might be forthcoming to enable an early agreement, we think Lubbers would consider delaying construction of permanent INF basing facilities at Woensdrecht, set to begin this April. [redacted]

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The prospects for successful INF deployment in the Netherlands, we believe, also are related to Dutch perceptions of US arms control efforts. The recent US proposal for the complete elimination of intermediate-range missiles in Europe and Asia may improve Washington's "peace image," but it may also strengthen Labor Party arguments that INF deployment in the Netherlands is unnecessary. Even the Labor Party, however, would find it difficult to maintain its unconditional opposition to INF if a US-Soviet interim accord called for limited cruise missile deployment in the Netherlands. Perceptions that Washington insists on stricter verification procedures or intends to ignore the limits set by the SALT II and ABM treaties almost certainly would make it more difficult for Lubbers to ignore suspicions within his own Christian Democratic Party that the United States continues to place greater emphasis on a military buildup than on an arms control agreement. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: The Netherlands: Election Politics and Prospects
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