



Speech on Arms Control by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stef Blok, Berlin, 15 March

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

No-one likes to create extra work for their staff. But sometimes you have to plan for every eventuality.

Sometimes you have to plan for a catastrophe, even as you hope it will be averted. And you won't need to make that speech.

Take the Cuban Missile Crisis, in 1962. A dramatic speech was drafted for President Kennedy in case it proved necessary to launch a conventional attack on Cuba. Or the time in 1983, at the height of the Cold War, when speechwriters drafted an eloquent address for Queen Elizabeth to give in the event of a nuclear war.

Both speeches are fascinating historical documents, but neither was ever delivered. Thank goodness! At times like these it's a relief when all your speechwriter's hard work turns out to be for nothing.

Thank you for inviting me here to speak about arms control in the 21st century.

It's an important issue, and a highly topical one in the Netherlands – for the government, parliament and the public alike. Especially at this point in the history of international relations, with the multilateral system and the treaty-based order coming under intense pressure. A time, moreover, in which international cooperation is more vital than ever, because our biggest problems transcend national borders, and no single country can solve them alone.

As a trading nation, the Netherlands has a greater interest than most in rules-based international relations – in 'right' above 'might' – and so we've worked tirelessly to that end, ever since the time of Hugo Grotius. With that same goal in mind the nations of the world devised and gradually built a system of international cooperation after two devastating world wars. And it was a success. Even when I was growing up, when the Cold War cast its dark shadow over the world. Despite that threat, in Europe – backed up by American security guarantees through NATO – we were able to rebuild our societies and economies until they became what they are today: an area of freedom, prosperity, stability and democracy.

An area that, for decades, grew in both size and influence. And yet, in recent years we have seen the opposite trend. The universal values and multilateral cooperation that brought us so much are being called into question in various parts of the world – and trampled underfoot.

This is – to put it mildly – not in our best interest. For that reason, the Netherlands will do all it can, even in the present climate, to strengthen the system from the inside out, working in close cooperation with partners and building coalitions as we go. We will work to preserve, rather than destroy, the system. To prevent a situation in which, as Robert Kagan put so well in the title of his most recent book, *The Jungle Grows Back*.



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Whether it's migration, climate change or international trade, we strive in our national policy and at EU level to ensure that we collaborate wherever necessary, given the transnational nature of these issues. That we keep making agreements and hold each other to them. So that we can maintain predictability and transparency in our international relations.

In the international arena, predictability and transparency are absolutely essential.

Especially when interests clash. Especially when the stakes are high.

This is certainly true when it comes to arms control, the theme of this conference. A theme in which the Netherlands has always invested a great deal – most recently as Chair of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee and Vice-President of the NPT Review Conference.

Why this long tradition of active engagement? Put simply, because there was – and is – so much at stake: the survival of entire societies. Not least in Europe, which lay – and unfortunately now again lies – within range of Russian intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

Seventy-seven years after the dawn of the nuclear age we have so far succeeded in averting catastrophe by taking the path of cooperation. A path with various parallel tracks, running globally via the NPT and its review conferences, via the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the IAEA, bilaterally with the INF Treaty and New START, and of course via NATO's consultative bodies.

For 77 years we have managed to keep the promise and peril of the nuclear age in balance.

For 77 years we have maintained that balance.

We must never forget that it always was – and remains – a fragile balance.

More than once, we've come close to catastrophe. During the Cuban Missile Crisis the world skirted the edge of the abyss. If we had gone over the edge, it would have been the end for us all.

And yet, here we are. And who do we have to thank for that, besides the courageous individual actors who made the right decisions at the most difficult times?

I firmly believe that this achievement can be attributed to the system of disarmament and arms control agreements concluded over the decades, often initiated by forward-thinking leaders. Without the NPT, without bilateral agreements, the chance of nuclear war would be far greater than it is today.

Of course, we must be realistic. It wasn't only these agreements that helped maintain the fragile balance. Deterrence was the other pillar on which strategic stability was founded and achieved.

Deterrence and arms control: two indispensable pillars for maintaining the fragile balance.

That was true in the past, and it's still true today.

I'd even go so far as to say that they are more crucial than ever.



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Because if we think that the planet is safer from such threats these days, then we are wrong. We haven't yet found a response to the catastrophic risks posed by proliferation of nuclear weapons. Not by a long way. One thing is clear: today, as in the past, the answer lies in a combination of measures. And the key elements are still arms control and deterrence.

If one falls away, the fragile balance will be lost.

So the fact that one of these elements is at risk as we speak – owing to the suspension of the INF Treaty – is a grave concern to us.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to make an urgent appeal.

On 2 February 2019, the United States felt compelled to announce its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty. Violation by the Russian Federation of the treaty provisions had left the US with no other choice. It's a decision we understand and support given the facts we have been able to independently confirm.

The only way to save the Treaty now is for Russia to respect it.

There is still a window of opportunity – it won't close until 2 August 2019. The key is in Moscow's hands. If Russia returns to compliance, the United States will be able to reconsider its intention to withdraw. To return to its own obligations, and to the path of cooperation.

We urge Russia to take this opportunity. To destroy the missiles and related systems that are in violation of the Treaty and come back into compliance.

To return to the negotiating table and resume dialogue.

To increase transparency, and decrease the chance of escalation.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In my view, and in the view of many analysts, we are at a fork in the road.

I know, this isn't the first time this has been said. And it isn't always easy to see when you've reached such a point. Historians will agree with me (and the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard) that life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards. And yet, I think politicians have a responsibility to recognise the importance of critical moments. To recognise a tipping point. The moment before the point of no return.

If we look at the current state of nuclear arms control, I think it's reasonable to use that term. And to recognise that it isn't too late to take courageous steps.

The need is clear. Not least because the situation in the 21st century is far more complex than it was in the 20th. Emerging technologies present new challenges to arms control. Cyber capabilities add new dimensions and complexities. New technologies raise the risks attached to nuclear weapons, but are also in and of themselves a risk to our strategic stability. Sensational stories about hypersonic weapons, doomsday scenarios involving drone swarms, artificial intelligence, the influence of quantum computing...



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This new nuclear age makes the fragile balance between peril and promise even more precarious.

Here, too, we need to make agreements. In doing so, we find support in the principles of international law, in humanitarian law and in the interests of stability and human dignity.

With that in mind, I would like to thank the German organisers of this conference. Our hope is resting on all the smart people in this room to come up with a new generation of ideas about arms control and agreements that meet the challenges of this era.

We are entering a new age of arms control.

The urgent challenge we face is broader than the INF Treaty alone. It's about the future of strategic stability in a post-bipolar world. We must preserve our existing arms control regimes and negotiate new instruments. It is our collective responsibility.

We owe it to ourselves, but above all we owe it to future generations.

Thank you.