



Source: Luns, 1 October 1971, NATO, Flickr

LUNS, Joseph Antoine Marie Hubert

Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs and fifth Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) 1971-1984

By **Jan-Willem Brouwer and Ine (C.M.) Megens** · Version 19 May 2015

Was born 28 August 1911 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands and passed away 17 July 2002 in Brussels, Belgium. He was the son of Hubert Marie Luns, painter-sculptor and professor in drawing, and Harriet Anna Paula Marie Louvrier. On 10 January 1939 he married Elisabeth Cornelia Baroness van Heemstra. They had a daughter and a son.

In 1929 Luns changed the order of his first names to Joseph Marie Antoine Hubert.

Biography

Luns grew up as the younger son in a Catholic family that was both artistic and cosmopolitan. His mother was Belgian of French decent and his father, a great connoisseur and admirer of French culture, was a painter and sculptor who later became professor in drawing at the Institute of Technology in Delft. Luns appreciated his father's language skills and easy manners. After completing secondary school in Amsterdam and Brussels, he undertook his military service in the Royal Dutch Navy. He reached the rank of signalman first class and kept a soft spot for maritime affairs throughout his lifetime. In October 1932 he began his law studies at the universities of Leiden and Amsterdam and, after receiving his law degree, spent half a year at the London School of

Economics and a summer at the German Institute for Foreigners in Berlin. As a student he developed a keen interest in international affairs, particularly defence issues, and he hoped that his stays abroad would increase his chance to join the diplomatic service. In October 1938 he joined the Dutch Foreign Service as a junior attaché in the small elitist diplomatic corps where Catholics were a tiny minority. After two years at the ministry in The Hague he assumed postings at the legations in Berne, Switzerland and Lisbon, Portugal. The Dutch government-in-exile called him to London and in October 1944 made him Secretary of the Embassy. In August 1949 Luns was promoted to counsellor and transferred to the Dutch delegation at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York. As second in charge, he was involved in all items on the agenda. The Dutch membership of the Security Council in 1951-1952 gave him insight into diplomacy at the highest level and provided him with the opportunity to build up an extensive network. Luns became a skilled diplomat, with a keen eye for political sensitivities, but always defended Dutch national interests.

After parliamentary elections in the Netherlands Luns resigned from the diplomatic service in September 1952 to become a member of the new cabinet led by Social-Democrat Willem Drees. Delicate coalition negotiations between the Labour Party and the Catholic People's Party, to which he belonged, had resulted in the unusual appointment of two Foreign Ministers, Luns and Johan Willem Beyen. Asked why a small country needed two foreign ministers, Luns, with characteristic wit, replied: 'As a small country we have a tremendous amount of outside world to cope with' (*The Times*, 18 July 2002). Starting in 1956 Luns reigned solo at the head of the Ministry. All in all he served in eight successive Dutch cabinets under seven prime-ministers and, with his 19 years in office (1952-1971), he became the longest serving minister in Dutch history. The longevity can be explained by the key position of the Catholic People's Party in Dutch politics, which belonged to all coalition cabinets, and by Luns' political and diplomatic skills as well as his immense popularity: 'Neither modest nor taciturn – on the contrary – Luns was exceptionally tall and showed high intelligence, obstinacy, reactionary conservatism, a boisterous sense of humour and a strong mixture of bluntness and joviality to see him through a long series of crises at home and abroad'. Unlike most Dutch politicians, Luns understood that it was not necessary 'to be solemn in order to be serious' (Van der Vat 2002). His unorthodox approach made him the media's favourite politician, as he was happy to talk to journalists and always ready for a joke. The Dutch population loved him for the same reasons. The Catholic People's Party benefited from his popularity, which emerged during the parliamentary elections of 1963 and 1967, when Luns, a devout Roman Catholic, gained many individual preference votes.

As Foreign Minister Luns embodied the Dutch commitment to both the Atlantic partnership and a supranational Europe. The Atlantic partnership was central in Dutch foreign politics, because under Cold War conditions only the United States (US) was capable of guaranteeing security in Western Europe, while Luns regarded European economic integration as much more important than political unification. Therefore, he judged every European proposal on its Atlantic repercussions, which explains why he dismissed the so-called Fouchet Plan for an intergovernmental political union of the six member states of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961. Presented by French President Charles de Gaulle, the Plan was backed by German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Luns, however, feared that the proposals would undermine the principles of the Treaties of Rome, which he had signed on behalf of the Netherlands in 1957, and would also harm the Atlantic partnership. Initially Luns stood alone, but his Belgian counterpart Paul-Henri Spaak joined him and the Fouchet Plan was finally withdrawn in 1962. Whereas de Gaulle tended to forgive Luns' successful opposition, as being in accordance with Dutch national interests, Adenauer did not. According to Luns, who relished in recounting the anecdote, Adenauer told him: 'When everything goes wrong, when I have a toothache, when the *Bundestag* is rebellious or when the press is cutting me down, I comfort myself with the thought that there is always someone who is worse off than me. And that is *Frau Luns*' (Muntzinger Archiv n.d.). Not being a European Federalist, Luns was convinced that strengthening the structure of the EEC would support Dutch national interests. He regarded a supranational Community as the only means to sustain the influence of the small European states and to prevent a potential Franco-German directorate. Under his leadership the Netherlands became a champion of the

European Communities, advocating a strong European Commission. Luns furthermore considered the 'Europe of the Six' to be too small. To him participation of the United Kingdom (UK) was crucial for commercial reasons and because it would reinforce the ties between Europe and the US. The UK's admission would also counterbalance the Franco-German axis within the EEC. He became the leading advocate of the EEC's enlargement and was seen by many as the major European opponent to de Gaulle. The London *Times* (13 March 1961) described him as 'the only one to look general de Gaulle in the eyes'. The encounters between the two tall men (Luns was over six feet, four inches) were frequent and often heated. In 1963 Luns condemned de Gaulle's veto to British membership as a 'deadly threat to the free world' (*Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 1962-1963: 657). Both crossed swords again in 1966, when France decided to leave the military structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in 1967, when de Gaulle vetoed the UK's EEC membership for the second time. After de Gaulle's resignation in 1969 Luns took great satisfaction in the French change of heart on the UK's entry into the common market. Due to his contribution to European integration he was awarded with the prestigious Charlemagne Prize in 1967, given to people who had actively engaged in West European unification.

Luns was a staunch anti-Communist, who held an unshakable belief in the Atlantic partnership and always stressed the need for good relations between Europe and the US. Nevertheless he did not shy away from confronting the US government. Tensions ran high when the US intervened in the growing conflict between the Netherlands and Indonesia over West New Guinea, the colony in the Far East that the Dutch had kept when Indonesia became independent in 1949. In subsequent years Indonesia claimed sovereignty over Dutch New Guinea, whereas the Netherlands argued that it should keep the area to allow the local population self-determination once sufficiently 'mature'. Initially the US supported the Dutch position and, in 1958, even promised military support in case of Indonesian aggression, but soon preventing Indonesia from falling under Communist control became more important for the US government. As relations between the US and Indonesia improved after John F. Kennedy took office as President, the US position toward West New Guinea changed. When Indonesian President Sukarno threatened an attack on the Dutch colony in 1961, Luns embodied the hard line against Indonesia, while Kennedy steered for a peaceful solution. Special assistant to Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger (1965: 534), recounts in his memoirs a meeting in the White House, with Luns opposing American mediation efforts: 'Luns was so carried away by the injustice of it all that he waved a flabby forefinger in Kennedy's face, a gesture which Kennedy courteously ignored'. Without US backing, the Netherlands was left with no choice but to hand the territory over to the UN in 1962, which subsequently gave it to Indonesia in 1963. Luns thus 'suffered what was probably his greatest diplomatic and political defeat at the hands of the Americans' (*The Times*, 18 July 2002). He was especially bitter about the role played by the President's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who, as Luns put it, 'after a five-day visit to Indonesia where we spent three centuries' had come to The Hague in early 1962 with the message that the Netherlands convey West New Guinea to Indonesia. Only two years later, in July 1964, Luns paid an official visit to Jakarta to shake hands with his former opponent President Sukarno, thus paving the way for the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In July 1971 Luns resigned as Minister of Foreign Affairs. By the end of the 1960s criticism and discontent had become visible, both in parliament and in public, given his stern support for US warfare in Vietnam and Portuguese dictator, António Salazar. Luns was a Conservative at heart who had no eye for the political and social changes that were taking place in Dutch society. On 1 October 1971 Luns was appointed as Secretary General of NATO, becoming the second Dutch Secretary General after Dirk Stikker (1961-1964). Being a highly respected figure in international politics, whose Atlantic commitment was well known (Brouwer and Megens 2012: 74), his nomination went undisputed. His ministerial longevity had allowed him to build up 'an unrivalled network of political friendships and contacts which came in useful when he switched from being a Minister and politician to an international civil servant at the helm of the Atlantic Alliance' (Shea 2002). He succeeded Manlio Brosio, the cautious and adept Italian diplomat who had shown effective leadership in times

of crises within the alliance. Unlike his predecessor, Luns did not indulge in details. He was 'not one for complex dossiers and technical details', according to NATO-press officer Jamie Shea (2002). Instead, Luns relied on his closest colleagues, first and foremost on his Chief of Staff, S.I.P. van Campen, and on his Deputy Secretary General, Paolo Pansa Cedronio, and was 'far less prepared and educated on the policy issues of the day than was Brosio' (Hendrickson 2006: 32). His courteous manners and interest in the people who worked for him nevertheless made him popular at the International Secretariat in Brussels. He was a likable man, given his humour and the numerous stories he had at hand. Some of his jokes have become legendary. Asked by a journalist how many people worked at NATO's headquarters he famously replied: 'About half of them' (Shea 2002).

Luns enjoyed trust and respect among the diplomatic representatives of NATO's member states. Many had known him as a skilled diplomat in his capacity as Foreign Minister. As NATO Secretary General he relied on his years of authority and presided over the weekly meetings of the ambassadors in an informal manner. According to US ambassador to NATO, Donald Rumsfeld (2011: 153), 'the tall and imposing Dutchman was an adept manager of the range of personalities and priorities represented by the fifteen permanent representatives to NATO'. In his role as Chairman of the North Atlantic Council Luns was at his best when trying to reach a compromise by using his charm, while he did not shy away from bullying individual representatives. 'He had charisma, wit and a dry humour that charmed royalty and disarmed any chief of state' as the American ambassador to NATO, David Abshire (1988: 22), argued. When Luns took office in 1971 one of his priorities was to improve political consultation within NATO. In the early 1970s American President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger made an effort to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union, but did not involve Allied partners in the bilateral negotiations between the two superpowers about the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons. When the multilateral discussions on mutual force reductions in Europe and the preparation for a European security conference showed little progress, Europeans began to worry about the likelihood of disengagement between US and European security. While several NATO member states reduced their defence budgets, Luns advocated restraint in reducing armed forces as long as the international negotiations had not yielded any results. Although he endorsed the *détente* policy in principle, his priority remained the defence of NATO territory. NATO doctrine was based on the twin pillars of *détente* and deterrence and should remain as such, Luns stated. However, by virtue of his position and his personal anti-Communist conviction the Secretary General favoured deterrence over *détente* and he warned repeatedly against naïve optimistic prospects for peace in Europe (Luns 1972, 'L'avenir' and 'NATO').

In cases where a conflict emerged between NATO member states Luns sought to mediate. In the spring of 1972 NATO got involved in the negotiations between the UK and Malta about the use of military facilities on the island. Despite a violent collision with Malta's Prime Minister, Dom Mintoff, Luns played a significant role in the bilateral negotiations. The same holds true for the fishery conflict between the UK and Iceland, the so-called Cod War, with bilateral hostilities threatening NATO's internal cohesion in 1972 and 1974. Therefore, NATO had to play a role in these issues, with Luns keeping an eye on the interests of the alliance as such. When intervening, he offered his good offices and tried to mediate, but not always successfully, as in the case of Greece and Turkey. Relations between the two worsened after the coup in Cyprus led by Greek officers, followed by a Turkish invasion in July 1974. In the wake of these events the Greek military government had to step down. The new democratic government was sceptical towards NATO and withdrew from the organization's military structure. The Greek government treated Luns with suspicion because he was viewed as a reactionary Conservative. Both Greece and Turkey placed their hopes in the US and the UK to solve the conflict. All Luns could do was emphasize the strategic importance of NATO's southern flank and look for practical solutions to the bilateral problems between the two member states. However, the Greek distrust was so profound that Luns did not play a role in the negotiations for Greece's return in the military structure in the spring of 1979.

Luns incessantly urged NATO member states to maintain an adequate number of military forces and to resist pressure to diminish their defence budgets, which often caused clashes with reluctant governments, such as the left-wing Dutch government of Joop den Uyl and his Minister of Defence, Henk Vredeling. Luns was widely known as a friend to the US, but Ryan Hendrickson (2006: 34) has claimed that this reduced his ability to generate wide support among the member states. Despite this attitude Luns never shied away from criticizing US policies and had occasional differences of opinion with the US government. During his frequent visits to Washington DC he kept appealing NATO to be used more intensively for political consultation, but despite good intentions, as for instance expressed in the declaration issued during the North Atlantic Council in Ottawa in June 1974, the situation did not improve. In 1979 NATO adopted a so-called double-track decision to deploy American cruise and Pershing II missiles on the European Continent and at the same time seek to negotiate an arms control agreement with the Warsaw Pact. This decision resulted in massive demonstrations against the nuclear arms race all over Western Europe. Many regarded the NATO Secretary General as the embodiment of an implacable and obstinate Western policy. Rallying support for the decision to deploy new missiles, while arguing that NATO was sincere in negotiating, was a lost cause when it came to public opinion. In a public speech for the Atlantic Treaty Association on 30 September 1981 in London, Luns criticized President Ronald Reagan's decision to go ahead with the production of the enhanced radiation warheads, known as the neutron bomb, as 'tactless' since this gave the impression, albeit false, that the US was trying to achieve military supremacy, rather than arms control (*New York Times*, 1 October 1981). This time Luns was more successful in insisting that the US should inform European allies about American-Soviet negotiations in a frank and timely manner through NATO bodies. On the basis of classified NATO documents Luns' biographer Albert Kersten (2010: 602-608) revealed that Luns made himself the spokesperson of the European member states who worried that the US was not interested in effective arms control agreements, but by the time Luns resigned in 1984 the first cruise missiles had been deployed.

In 1979 a Dutch newspaper disclosed that Luns had been a member of the Dutch National Socialist movement from 1933 to 1936. Luns flatly denied these allegations, but later he invoked transparent excuses such as the suggestion that his brother might have enrolled him. The affair had no immediate political consequences. Because he left before the movement chose its ultimate anti-Semitic course his party membership was considered a youthful misjudgement. However, the implausible way he dealt with the issue affected his credibility and reinforced his Conservative image. In the early 1980s occasional rumours about his retirement were heard in Brussels, but it took until June 1984 before he resigned at the age of 72. It was generally agreed that Luns, the longest-serving head of NATO ever, 'had done well in an impossible job but had outstayed his welcome' (Van der Vat 2002). After Luns had left his post, the alliance agreed to limit the tenure of a Secretary General to five years and Lord Peter Carrington succeeded him. On retirement the US government awarded Luns with its highest civilian award, the Medal of Freedom. At NATO's headquarters in Brussels the pressroom was named after him, honouring his merits. He experienced an almost childish pleasure in the many honours bestowed upon him, as he was 'always in need of applause'. Kersten (2010: 628) also characterizes him as a passionate politician fully dedicated to his job. It is nevertheless striking that Luns is absent from most NATO histories, with references to his leadership role being scarce (Hendrickson 2006: 32). His leadership style and unconventional performance has stuck in the memory, rather than any international political success. Luns, according to Shea (2002), will be remembered at NATO as a 'colourful character with a regal bearing and an acute sense of humour, which at times could be disarmingly clownish'. Never reluctant to call a spade a spade, he was not bound by 'the modern culture of political correctness' (Shea 2002). His humour and straightforward approach often were effective when chairing meetings and negotiations. He was a reliable and useful partner to NATO's most prominent member, the US. However, although a staunch supporter of the Atlantic partnership, he never did the bidding of the US and would always defend the interests of the organization. He preserved unity as much as might reasonably be expected in difficult times. Initiating new plans or developing far-reaching viewpoints was neither his personal style, nor expected from NATO's Secretary General. As Dutch Foreign Minister Luns had always given priority to

Dutch national interests, as NATO Secretary General he once more took up the role of the diplomat which he was at heart: an international civil servant who knew he needed to subsume himself to the organization in order to make the best out of the job.

Archives

- Luns' private papers are housed at the National Archives in The Hague, The Netherlands: www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/ead/index/eadid/2.21.351/aantal/20
 - a selection of the papers relating to his years as NATO Secretary General have been published at the website of NATO Archives in Brussels, Belgium: www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/95783.htm
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