Every Tuesday, the permanent representatives to Nato, the Nato ambassadors, meet for a private lunch at a different ambassador's residence and prepare for the North Atlantic Council the following day. So that day we were hosted by the Belgian ambassador and this lunch is strictly off the record - no mobile phones, no messages, no interruptions. It's [as if] the cardinals of Nato were basically in conclave. So we were interrupted unusually, first of all by one of the ambassadors getting a message from his chauffeur, getting a message that something had happened. That was then followed by one of my bodyguards coming in with a mobile phone - so that was two rules broken - and this was my office to say there were reports of one of the planes hitting the World Trade Center. And I must say I thought, and so did the others who I told, that [it was] a little trainer aircraft, perhaps hitting, you know So anyway, a few minutes later another phone call came in to say that a second plane had hit. At that point the lunch was abandoned and we all

an issue that you might want to raise, and I have got a draft statement ready." He said: "I hadn't really thought about it. I'll come back to you." So they did about fifteen minutes later and said: "Yes, this is of real interest".

Question: But even at that stage it was clear to you that the real import of what you had done was diplomatic and related to the process of building a coalition rather than military.

Answer: In the first instance, it was political. It was a sign of solidarity and it was also a signal to the terrorists that they had stepped over a real threshold, stepped across a real red line with the international community. Here was Nato, formed in 1949, 52years-old, never having invoked Article 5 of its founding treaty, saying that these people had gone beyond a red line that the Soviet Union had never got beyond. So it wasn't just politically significant in public relations terms, it had a very strong deterrent effect as well, and I think it gave a message to those who had perpetrated these acts that they were in breach of a normal standard of behaviour that was going to lead them into serious trouble. But it also had a military implication because all of the countries in Nato were offering their militaries for whatever retaliation the Americans were going to use against those who had perpetrated it and very shortly afterwards the Americans came forward with a portfolio of measures that they wanted: the AWACs planes to be transferred to the United States, the standing naval forces, the big fleet of ships in the Mediterranean moved to the eastern Mediterranean partly for deterrent purposes but also partly for interdiction purposes, the access to air space, to ports and harbours, to fuel, to [offer] solidarity with countries that would be affected by the campaign against terrorism. All of these were military measures that flowed from the Article 5 decision.

Answer: President Putin has got a standard line on Chechyna. He believes and has believed ever since it started that he is fighting on behalf of the West and the world in general, that he is in the front line against fundamentalism and I think he now also makes it clear that he believes there are direct connections between the Chechen rebels and al-Qaeda and Bin Laden's network as well.

Question: It was only 3 weeks since September 11th at that stage, and yet it sounds as if huge changes were already taking place in the relationship between Nato and the Russians which perhaps people didn't appreciate at the time. But it does sound as if you made a very dramatic difference very quickly.

Answer: The events of September 11th had an immediate impact on Vladimir Putin himself. First of all, I think he felt there was an element of solidarity because he believes that the Russians have been attacked in the same way by terrorists. Secondly, the twin towers was the biggest terrorist attack on Russians. Over a hundred Russians were killed in the twin towers so there was a direct national involvement at that time. I think there was a feeling that here, for the first time in 60 years, was a common threat, a common enemy for the Russians and the West in general, and emotionally he reacted very, very swiftly. Indeed, it was one of the first telephone calls to President Bush, and after that it didn't let up. The airspace, the central European bases, increased co-operation and intelligence exchange - all of that has gone on and is still robust even to this day.

Question: And other things too? The Russians don't any more seem quite so concerned about son of Star Wars and the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) treaty do they?

Answer: There is certainly a more relaxed attitude to some of those issues because I think the Russians feel that they can work out answers to a number of these problems.

Question: Did the Americans tell you when the bombing was going to begin?

Answer: Yes, I had a phone call from the vice-president of the United States before the bombing started.

Question: Can you tell me what he said?

Answer: He said, "I am calling you because very shortly from now we are going to start a military campaign against Afghanistan. I thought you would want to know in advance and I am phoning a few people to tell them that this is going to happen." He said that it is going to be a heavy attack, but they have refused to give up Bin Laden and refused to expel the al-Qaeda terrorist network and we have no alternative. Therefore, in the circumstances as the leader of our primary alliance, I am letting you know".

Question: When he said "very shortly", how shortly did he mean?

Answer: Within the hour.

Question: So you found out really right at the last minute?

Amsweer: They were phoning most people at that time. I think that as secretary general of Nato, I was pretty high up in the hierar

Answer: Some of them were because some of them had gone to a great deal of trouble with parliaments and with their own militaries in order to get the decisions made. But I think they all understood why it was that the United States couldn't quickly and easily mesh in a lot of the offers that were being made, and they were eventually picked up. They are being picked up even as we go along. But the nature of the American operation was such that they weren't easily able to plug in a whole series of different offers of different levels of activity. There was certainly some disappointment about, but I think it was understood.

Question: Is it fair to say that the Americans are now so sophisticated, so far ahead of the rest of us that it will never be necessary for them to call on other people in these sorts of circumstances?

Answer: It would not be true to say that they've reached a level of sophistication that they will not need people to help. In the particular circumstances that were involved in Afghanistan they were able to do it and to do it on their own. But even there, there are limitations to it. They still needed airspace in Central Asia and over Pakistan and the Gulf areas, so they weren't doing it on their own. They needed to have other facilities and other help in order to allow them to be able to act as an American military machine. But that was a one-off situation and the Taleban collapsed very quickly after the assault took place. In future it will not be that easy and the Americans will want allies and will need and will have to have allies. And, of course, Nato is the biggest permanent coalition of allies in the world.

Question: You made the point that the campaign is far from over. That meeting which endorsed the idea that this was something that came under Article 5 gave a sort of blessing to what's happened in Afghanistan. Would it give a similar blessing to things if they would happen in Iraq or Iran, which are being talked about at the moment?

Answer: If the Americans came forward with evidence that linked the events of 11th September with other countries, then the North Atlantic Council would obviously want to listen very carefully to that evidence. But our decision, and indeed the decision on military action by the United States Congress, was specifically related to the events of 11th September, and the Americans produced the initial trench of evidence linking al-Qaeda and Bin Laden to what had gone on. I would expect them to come back with additional evidence if they were to go beyond Afghanistan.

Question: What would be Nato's position be if the Americans did that?

Answer: It's difficult to talk in hypothetical terms, but there is an automatic sympathy with the United States at the present time and a willingness to look very sympathetically at evidence that is produced about linkages with other countries. So far, American spokesmen, both in here and publicly have said there isn't a particular link between Saddam's poisonous regime and the particular events of the 11th September. But there is a lot of new information coming on stream, and if that evidence was to become apparent then we would want to hear about it.

Question: You made the point that you were very much to the fore of making