



10 DOWNING STREET

12 January, 1982

THE PRIME MINISTER

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*Dear Mr. Reagan,*

Thank you for your letter of 21 December about technical developments in nuclear weaponry and associated systems, and the concern that such developments might jeopardise the present relatively stable nuclear balance.

This concern is shared by politicians as well as military strategists and planners. It is true that technical developments have led to an evolution in thinking about deterrence. In particular, the deployment of highly accurate missiles has meant that, for deterrence to remain credible, we must have the ability to respond to limited, as well as strategic, nuclear aggression. This makes the maintenance of deterrence more complex. But it does not mean that the United States or NATO in general entertain illusions about waging limited nuclear war. Indeed, the general effect is to make the nuclear balance more stable than in the past because deterrence now rests on a much wider basis of possible responses to nuclear aggression than was available in the 1960s.

The vulnerability of land-based missiles is of course much debated at present. But we are convinced that ballistic missile carrying submarines will continue to remain immune to detection and thus invulnerable. They therefore provide an assured second strike capability and make it impossible to "win" a nuclear war by means of a disarming first strike.

In general, I believe one should be cautious in trying to deduce propositions about strategy merely from the particular characteristics of any given nuclear system. Presumably the Russians

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must know - as the Western Alliance certainly does - that the outbreak of nuclear war would be an unimaginable catastrophe, and that to gamble the fate of civilisation on an assumed technical virtuosity in the strategic nuclear field would be irrational, to put it mildly. This does not mean that we can afford to let it go unheeded if the Soviet Union seeks to disturb the existing relatively stable balance to its own advantage. But I do not accept the view that the United States is moving to a strategy of a disarming first strike. As President Reagan said on 18 November: "No NATO weapons, conventional or nuclear, will ever be used in Europe except in response to attack". The concept of a pre-emptive first strike has never been and is not a part of Alliance strategy.

At the same time, I fully agree with you about the importance of nuclear arms control. As you will know, negotiations on intermediate range nuclear forces are now under way in Geneva where the United States delegation has the full support of the European allies in proposing the complete elimination of long range land-based theatre missiles on both sides. We now look forward to the resumption of strategic arms reduction talks in the Spring. I welcome American statements of their intention to seek real reductions in strategic weapons. The achievement of verifiable and balanced measures of arms control is a major priority for the Government. I believe that these negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union offer the prospect of genuine progress towards limiting and reducing current levels of nuclear weapons.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Raymond Beal*

Dr. M. F. Perutz, C.H., F.R.S.