



PM/79/43

PRIME MINISTERSALT: THE GOVERNMENT'S PUBLIC RESPONSE

1. Now that the US/Soviet Summit has been announced for 15 June, SALT II is attracting considerable public attention and we will come under pressure to declare our attitude. You and I will be seeing Secretary Vance on 21 and 22 May and he will no doubt urge us to give SALT II a warm welcome. At the end of the month I am attending the NATO Ministerial meeting in The Hague, where the Americans are likely to press for the support of their Allies over the SALT agreement.
2. I know that you have doubts about aspects of SALT II. We all agree, President Carter included, that it is not a perfect agreement. But I feel strongly that public support for the agreement is desirable for reasons of important national interest.
3. SALT ratification is President Carter's top priority for 1979. Alliance attitudes will be a key factor in the outcome. Among the Allies, our own view is crucial both because of our nuclear expertise and because we are known to be well informed about SALT. Our public reactions will therefore be closely scrutinised, by the US Administration, by our Allies, by the Soviet Union, and by US public opinion. Even a neutral reaction will harm President Carter's position. There are signs that our initial response has been interpreted as cool by the Americans, as well as the Italians and French.
4. Our public attitude to SALT II will therefore set the tone for our relations with the American Administration. If it is felt that we are adding to the President's difficulties, it could seriously affect US attitudes on issues of crucial importance to us (Polaris replacement, Africa, etc).
5. Our attitude will also have implications for relations with our other allies. Chancellor Schmidt and President Giscard have already welcomed SALT II. Our smaller allies are, for the most part, even more enthusiastic. Many face domestic problems over

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theatre nuclear force (TNF) modernisation and have indicated that this can go ahead only in the context of continuing progress in arms control, of which SALT II is the corner-stone. For us to hold back alone would set us at odds with the rest of the Alliance.

6. Finally, we need to bear in mind not only the pluses and minuses of SALT II as it stands, but also the consequences if SALT II is rejected. These fall under five headings:

(a) The Soviet strategic build-up will continue unchecked. By the late '80s they will probably have about 3,000 systems (compared with the 2,250 SALT ceiling), including SS16 (banned in SALT), with 30 or so MIRVs to each of their SS18s (compared with 10 under SALT). On past form, they would also probably develop three or four new types, compared with only one permitted in SALT II;

(b) East/West relations will be less manageable at a time when the Soviet Union is increasingly powerful and when a new Soviet leadership is emerging;

(c) US defence expenditure will have to be diverted to strategic competition and this could be at the expense of NATO's Long-Term Defence Programme for conventional forces;

(d) Verification of Soviet programmes will be more difficult, since there will be no restriction on Soviet interference in American "national technical means" of verification or on the Soviet use of coded testing for their new systems;

(e) Other arms control negotiations will be set back, in particular MBFR and our hopes of negotiating restrictions on SS20 and Backfire in future stages of SALT.

7. We shall of course want to take a closer look at the final detail of SALT II in deciding our position, and I propose shortly to circulate a further paper for discussion in OD. This paper will deal with the impact of the non-circumvention article on our own future plans and will suggest how we might respond when SALT II is signed, and the line we should take in the Alliance.

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8. Meanwhile I believe it is essential for the sake of our wider foreign policy and defence interests that our attitude to SALT II should not be open to misinterpretation. I suggest that, for the moment, our public reaction should be on the following lines:

"We are glad that the SALT II negotiations have progressed far enough for a summit to take place between President Carter and President Brezhnev and welcome the settlement of major outstanding issues. We have long supported efforts to achieve strategic arms limitation and believe that SALT II is an important step on the long road to a more stable and peaceful world. It touches on important British and Alliance interests and we look forward to examining the details of what has finally emerged."

9. If you, or other colleagues, see difficulties with this line, perhaps we could discuss the matter briefly in OD on Monday.

10. I am sending copies of this minute to all colleagues on OD, and Sir John Hunt (Cabinet Office).

(CARRINGTON)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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