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THE PRIME MINISTER

INF Negotiations

1. We shall be discussing in MISC 7 on 27 January two important issues related to the planned deployment of American intermediate range missiles in Europe later this year: the question of control and the timetable for deployment. After that, we shall be meeting at Chequers on 30 January, and I hope that we shall take that opportunity to focus our attention on the situation in the negotiations themselves. It will be important to clear our minds about what should be said on this subject to the US Vice-President when he is here on 9/10 February. You might welcome a brief update in the meantime on the latest developments.

2. The next round of negotiations on INF begins in Geneva on 27 January. Since the last round ended before Christmas there has been a good deal of speculation, much of it unfortunately in the press, about the continued viability of the zero option approach as the basic Western negotiating position. Some of this speculation has been misinformed. But there are clear indications from Rome and Bonn that the Italians and Germans are moving to the view that the Americans should now consider seriously a new move in the INF negotiations involving a proposal for some form of interim agreement. We have also learned from private sources that a good deal of discussion on the same lines is going on in Washington. Officials here and in the MOD have been examining the options and I hope to be in a position to give you a fully up-to-date account of the latest developments at the meeting at Chequers.

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3. My own view is that we must continue to insist on the essential criteria which you established clearly in your interview with Brian Walden on ITV on 16 January and again in the House during questions on 18 January. The key points are that we must have an agreement which is balanced, i.e. which provides for equal numbers of warheads on weapon systems of similar type as between the US and the USSR; and that the counting system (used to decide which systems are included and which excluded) must not be bogus. Furthermore I see no reason to depart from our position that the zero level is the best long-term outcome. I think too that we need to keep in mind that, for the first part of this year at least, the contest between the Soviet Union and the NATO allies will be one for the hearts and minds of Western public opinion. The Americans have made it clear that they do not intend to make any move from their present position at any rate in the opening stages of the INF talks when they reconvene on 27 January. But there may be much to be said for a move very soon in the negotiations which preserves absolutely intact our main objective and our basic criteria but which provides the Alliance with the high ground in terms of its public posture.

4. I look forward to discussing these points at Chequers on 30 January. It is clear from what we have heard about Vice-President Bush's visit that he will look to you for a clear statement of the British position. I have no doubt that this will be of particular importance in Washington as possible negotiating options are considered.

5. I am copying this minute to Michael Heseltine and Sir Robert Armstrong.

(FRANCIS PYM)