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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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21 September 1983

*Dear John,*

Prime Minister's Visit to US: Nuclear Matters

This letter is intended to augment the brief (PMVB 83/6) submitted for the Prime Minister's discussions with President Reagan on the more sensitive nuclear arms control issues.

The discussion with the President will present a timely opportunity for the Prime Minister to review the political difficulties facing European allies in the run-up to INF deployment; and to sound the President on how he intends to handle bilateral negotiations with the Russians as he moves into election year.

The President will certainly be interested in the Prime Minister's views on how, in light of her recent meetings with the German Chancellor and the Dutch and Italian Prime Ministers, she sees key Allies standing up to the political pressures ahead in the run-up to Cruise missile and Pershing 2 deployment. The President will be particularly interested in the Prime Minister's judgement of Chancellor Kohl's position; and to hear how the Prime Minister thinks that the shooting down of the Korean airliner will have affected political opposition in Europe to INF deployment.

President Reagan will just have made (on 26 September) a speech to the UNGA reaffirming the US commitment to the arms control process and disclosing a flexible approach to the INF and START negotiations. The Prime Minister will no doubt wish to congratulate him on having resisted pressure to suspend arms control negotiations in the wake of the airliner outrage, and on having taken a politically bold step in going ahead, so soon after the incident, with consultations with allies on adjustments to the INF negotiating position (FCO telegram No 1536 to Washington attached). This shows that he has not lost sight of the long term need to work towards more soundly based relationship with the

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Russians. But at the same time he has taken advantage of the present climate in the United States to get Congressional approval for a further 5% real term increase in defence spending and to advance the prospects for Congressional funding of key programmes such as MX and the B1 bomber. An INF agreement or a new Vladivostok-type framework agreement for START could be a significant electoral bonus if the President seeks a second term. But the Russians have no cause to assist him in this respect and their continued blocking of US disarmament initiatives might strengthen criticism of the President from both the right and the left. This will therefore be a good moment to underline once again to President Reagan the important Alliance stake in being seen to maintain genuine efforts to achieve arms control objectives.

The brief (paragraph 3 of PMVB(83)6) touches on the issue of British and French nuclear weapons in relation to arms control. In the Foreign Secretary's view it would be useful to have an exchange with President Reagan on the subject and to explore American thinking. The Prime Minister will be aware (Roger Bone's letter of 13 September on the London meeting of the Special Consultative Group) that we have been warned in strict confidence that the President is concerned over the problem of how in due course these weapons might be associated with the arms control process. We can be quite confident that the President will remain firm on the issue as far as INF talks are concerned. It is also clear from various discussions with US officials that there is no question of the Americans being attracted by the notion of direct inclusion in the START negotiations. But, equally, there is little doubt that the President will have come under pressure from Chancellor Kohl and perhaps other European Allies to urge on us the need to develop a rather fuller public explanation of how the UK strategic deterrent might relate to the arms control process in the longer term. The Prime Minister will have an opportunity to discover just how much the President is concerned about this and whether he has any ideas of his own.

The Prime Minister can also expect to be asked questions in public on this subject whilst in Washington. She will no doubt wish to draw on the holding formula which she has agreed to include in her reply to Andropov's recent message, subject to French and US views. (The French have been consulted and are content: we are also in touch with the Americans.) The formulation is:

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'I must say in all frankness that it is difficult to understand your preoccupations with British strategic weapons. They represent a tiny fraction of yours (the British deterrent is less than three per cent of the size of your strategic missile and bomber force). In that they constitute our ultimate national deterrent, they are weapons of last resort which are in no sense comparable to your SS20 force. They are the minimum necessary for effective deterrence. But it is worth adding that we are not trying to claim that British nuclear weapons should never be relevant to any arms control negotiations. If Soviet and United States strategic arsenals were to be very substantially reduced and no significant change had occurred in Soviet defensive capabilities, Britain would of course want to review her position and to consider how best she could contribute to arms control in the light of the reduced threat'.

The other nuclear arms control issue which the Prime Minister might usefully broach with the President is START. The debate on INF has tended to obscure public attention on START. In fact, objectively speaking, the prospects for progress in START remain better than in INF (although the Russians are most unlikely to move towards an agreement during the run in to INF deployment in the months ahead). It would be timely to remind the President of the importance that we attach to achieving progress towards strategic arms reductions for sound security reasons as well as for presentational reasons in the nuclear debate. If the Prime Minister were to speak in these terms it could be highly valuable in the context of discussions currently going on within the Administration on options in START.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram in the Ministry of Defence and to David Goodall in the Cabinet Office.

*John, even*

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