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D/S of S/221/83

18th November 1983

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21/11

Thank you for your letter of 10th November about the question of the physical control of nuclear weapons systems deployed in this country or operated by British forces. Let me deal with some of the points you raised in your reply to my own letter which itself dealt with a simple factual point. *will request if required*

You mention precedent and make much of what Mr Harold Macmillan did about THOR. The arrangements for THOR need be seen in the circumstances of the time, but I agree that they are relevant to today's arguments in one sense. All so-called "dual key" arrangements including THOR, whatever the actual form of physical control involved, have operated on the basis that one country owns and operates the delivery system and another (the US) controls and supplies the warhead. The Government considered "dual key" for cruise missiles on this basis and for reasons which have been explained many times - including the opportunity cost to our conventional defence effort - concluded that the balance of advantage clearly lay against acquiring it.

It is disingenuous of you to compare the sailing of a submarine from port with the launching of a cruise missile. As you well know, the comparison with sailing from port is deploying the cruise missile

The Rt Hon Dr David Owen MP



off-base on a routine training exercise. There is a comparison you could have drawn between the launching of a cruise missile from British territory and the Poseidon case, and that, of course, would be with the firing of a Poseidon missile from a US submarine in a British port or British territorial waters. Both cases concern missiles which you allege represents the key distinction in this argument. But you may be reluctant to go down this road since Governments of which you were a member were content to accept that Polaris and Poseidon missiles in US submarines that could be launched from British territorial waters should be governed by the arrangements originally agreed by Clement Attlee - that is that their use in these circumstances should be a matter of joint decision by the President and the Prime Minister. They did not argue that this arrangement should be supplemented by some form of joint physical control or "dual key". I think that successive Governments have been absolutely right to take that line. That is the line that this Government has taken over cruise missiles.

On the other points in your letter, I must say I was surprised by your conclusions that Britain's position as a nuclear weapon state and our arrangements for joint decision-making render us more liable to attack. You clearly see the joint decision-making argument to be sufficiently watertight to be credible in Soviet eyes. But I am not sure how you see that our position as a nuclear weapons state makes us more liable to attack. The Alliance's strategic nuclear forces, including our own Polaris capability, provide backing for other nuclear forces in this country and act as a deterrent against Soviet nuclear attack. It is for this reason that the need for such forces has been supported by successive Governments since the war.

Finally, you mentioned France. I suggest that one reason why the French Government's nuclear weapons policy carries conviction with its people is that politicians across a broad spectrum sustain this policy both in and out of Government. In this country the



consensus on defence since the war which has served us so well has been broken, but not by this Government. We have considered very carefully the issues involved here and all the precedents. We have reached a view in the best interests of the country in line with the approach of previous Governments: we will not change it in search of short-term party political advantage.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael Heseltine". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M" and a long, sweeping tail.

Michael Heseltine

21 NOV 1983

