

PRIME MINISTER

COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN (CTB)

Another long minute on arms control from the Foreign Secretary.

The argument in this case is whether or not we should change our position on a CTB.

The Americans and French oppose a CTB because they reckon they need to test their nuclear weapons in order to keep their deterrent credible.

By contrast we have rested our public case purely on verification arguments - though in practice we have no less a need to test, particularly with Trident coming along.

The Foreign Secretary is uneasy about this. The verification argument is under increasing attack by scientific opinion. Our position looks inconsistent with that of the US. The Russians are mounting a quite successful propaganda campaign on testing.

On the other hand, he worries that shifting our position to bring it into line with that of the Americans would be attacked here as disavowing the aims of a test-ban altogether and as yet another example of the government just tagging along behind the Americans.

He concludes therefore (after 13 paragraphs) that we should not change our approach.

Our position is vulnerable in some respects. If the Russians ever called our bluff by proposing acceptable verification procedures, we should be on the spot. We would either have to come clean and say that we didn't want a CTB after all. Or we would find ourselves lined up with the Russians against the Americans.

But the odds against this are pretty high. The Russians would in practice be uncomfortable with a CTB (particularly if they feel that the Americans are stealing a march on them in strategic defence). They know that a CTB is in practice likely - if it happens at all - to follow cuts in offensive weapons rather than precede them.

If this time we shan't be faced with a problem of substance, presentation becomes all. And here it surely suits us better to have a position distinct from, and potentially more flexible than, the United States. The last thing we need post-Libya and post the recent decision on SALT is a gratuitous move towards an American position (even if in our heart of hearts we are relieved that it is their position).

So I think the Foreign Office reach the right conclusion, even if not for all the right reasons.

Agree the Foreign Secretary's conclusion?

C D POWELL

2 June 1986

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34

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

3 June 1986

Dear Tony,

**COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN (CTB):
UNITED KINGDOM PUBLIC POSTURE**

The Prime Minister has considered the Foreign Secretary's minute of 2 June about our public posture on the comprehensive test ban. The Prime Minister agrees with the conclusions of that minute as set out in paragraph 13 and the accompanying line to take. Subject to the views of colleagues, she sees no need for an OD discussion.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to members of OD and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely

(Charles Powell)

A.C. Galsworthy, Esq., C.M.G.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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C D POWELL

2 June 1986

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PRIME MINISTER

Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB): UK Public Posture

1. In 1977 negotiations began between HMG, the United States and the Soviet Union with the aim of concluding a Treaty banning all nuclear tests. When this Government assumed office two years later, we reaffirmed the British commitment to these negotiations, and our desire to see such a Treaty concluded. Peter Carrington, then Foreign Secretary, stated in October 1980 that "a CTB is important for two reasons: first, it will curb the development of new and more destructive nuclear warheads, thereby curtailing this aspect of competition in strategic weapons; secondly, it will demonstrate our good faith towards those countries - now well over a hundred - which, under the NPT, have formally surrendered the right to develop nuclear weapons".

2. However, the negotiations, which had made a certain amount of progress but still left a number of important issues unresolved, were suspended late in 1980 with the change of Administration in Washington. Thereafter, President Reagan instituted a far-reaching review of US policy, as a result of which he concluded in 1982 that the US would not resume the negotiations. Since then, the US have continued to insist in public that achieving a CTB remains their long-term goal; but to argue that such a ban must be viewed "in the context of deep cuts in nuclear forces, improved verification capabilities, expanded confidence-building measures, and the maintenance of an effective deterrent".

3. In effect, the US approach defers any new negotiations on a CTB to the indefinite future, and states that as long as nuclear weapons are needed as an element of deterrence, the US

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must continue to test, in order to ensure their safety, capability, reliability, and modernisation. This firm US position, which has become wholly explicit in recent months, is most unlikely to change during the lifetime of the present Administration.

4. For our part, we have entertained reservations about the verifiability of a CTB; and we have also had concerns about the wider effect of such a ban on our ability to maintain a credible national deterrent, which continues to depend upon periodic testing. Given these doubts, we have not been anxious to see the trilateral or other negotiations resumed. In any case, the US position has precluded this possibility. Since 1982, however, we have rested the public presentation of our case for non-resumption almost entirely upon the verification problems inherent in a CTB, and the poor prospects for solutions to them. In consequence we have stated that any new negotiations would be of doubtful value, and that it would be premature to revive them.

5. In recent months, this public position has become increasingly uncomfortable. I have therefore reviewed it, as I indicated in my minute to you of 16 May on the broader themes of arms control; and I have exchanged ideas with George Younger. Given the wider domestic political factors which are involved, I know that you and other colleagues will also wish to consider the position.

6. Our present stance is difficult for four reasons:

(i) our argument about the non-verifiability of a CTB has come under increasing attack from non-official scientists, who claim that present technology is adequate for verification purposes and becoming more so all the time. Our technical case remains sound, albeit narrowly based. But our argument is open to the counter-claim that the best way to

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resolve outstanding verification problems would be to resume negotiations as to the means of doing so. There are some technical problems in obtaining adequate verification, quite apart from Soviet intransigence. Nonetheless, the alleged new Soviet flexibility on verification puts further pressure on us;

(ii) our public line appears disingenuous in that it ignores the continued role which testing needs to play in maintaining confidence in, and therefore the credibility of our national deterrent. This is a point on which our critics will increasingly harp as UK Trident features more in the public debate;

(iii) the broad and fundamental US opposition, as indicated above, contrasts with our own reliance on the verification factors as the basis for opposition to a CTB. This contrast is exploited by our own critics, either to argue the weakness or ingenuousness of our case, or to place us in the position of appearing to contradict the US arguments; and

(iv) an enduring, if misplaced, link has been established between progress towards a CTB and the preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). (In our own statements during the trilateral negotiations, we laid some emphasis on this point.) We managed to get over this hurdle at the Review Conference last September. But both opponents and supporters of the NPT continue to argue that the failure of the nuclear weapons states to constrain their testing programmes remains the greatest threat to the long-term future of the NPT.

7. In these circumstances it is not surprising that all the Opposition parties, as well as the "peace movement" more generally and, of course, the Soviet Union, have fastened on

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to the CTB issue as a stick with which to beat us. The Russians, in particular, have made great play recently with their continuing unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and their desire to see the CTB negotiations resume. In both his recent letters to you, Mr Gorbachev laid special emphasis on these points. (It is perhaps indicative of the artfully selective way the Russians intend to play their hand that, in contrast, he made no such emphasis in his earlier messages to President Reagan and President Mitterrand; presumably he recognised that their position and public opinion in their countries were less susceptible to pressure on this point.) The previous Soviet efforts to promote a special session of the UN, or a US-Soviet Summit on nuclear testing is further proof of their eagerness to play the issue for all its propaganda worth, although their failure to pick up the US invitation to the Nevada Test Site is a flaw in their otherwise strong public position.

8. Against this background, it would be easier to defend our position in a few years time if we were now to shift our current public posture away from its almost total dependence upon verification arguments; and to a mix of argumentation which would set the whole issue of a CTB in a broader and more realistic political context. We could argue not only the verification case, but also the political fact that a resumption of negotiations is precluded by the attitudes of other potential participants apart from the Russians ie US, France and China. In consequence, we could urge the need to concentrate on the politically possible and the strategically desirable, in the form of the deep cuts in current nuclear forces which are under negotiation in Geneva already. At the same time we could deal with the point about the link between our deterrent and our attitude to testing by explaining the progressive loss of credibility under a CTB; and by emphasising that such a loss could only be accepted when there had been significant changes in the present strategic

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situation, including the role played by nuclear forces. This sort of approach would in effect bring us into line with the French, who have never made any bones about their rejection of a CTB.

9. Above all, such a shift would be more consistent with our real view, which we have no interest in underplaying in the context of the wider nuclear debate, that nuclear deterrence will remain essential for the foreseeable future, with whatever that implies in terms of our own deterrent; and that a nuclear-free world - one of the causes that sustain the CTB case - is nothing but illusion or an element of Soviet propaganda.

10. Against this approach I have considered the political disadvantages. Both despite and because of the effect which a CTB would progressively have on our and US ability to maintain a credible deterrent, a Treaty has become enshrined as a cardinal aim in the mythology of disarmament, even in this country. The suggestion that we, like the Americans, were now prepared to disavow this aim, at least for the foreseeable future, would be sharply attacked. It would be seen to conflict with the commitment we assumed under the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 and subsequently re-affirmed in the NPT: "to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time, and to continue negotiations to this end". It could in addition have a damaging impact on our efforts at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, where the supporters of a CTB hold sway, to make progress towards a ban on chemical weapons.

11. Such a shift would certainly risk, at least in the short run, considerable controversy in this country. The Opposition would seize upon such a shift to allege that it was not only a disavowal of HMG's commitment to progress in arms control, but a further example of our readiness to tag along behind the Americans.

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12. The essential problem is that as soon as we make a case against a CTB on grounds that go beyond the verification argument as the primary factor, the credibility of the latter will be gravely weakened. We shall be asked why we have not come clean much earlier; why for four years and more we have concealed our true judgement; and why, apart from not wishing to diverge from the White House line, we have now decided to overturn the previous, well-established and - to some extent - acceptable posture. In current circumstances the fact that "on yet another issue" - as it would be put - we were aligning ourselves with the US position would be perhaps the most damaging factor of all.

13. None of these will be easy questions to answer. And they underline the point that the ultimate judgement on whether we shift our ground must depend upon an assessment of its impact on domestic opinion. In these circumstances, and with some reluctance which George Younger entirely shares, I have concluded that we should not make a major change in our approach. Instead, we should continue to argue the verification case; to urge the need for more technical work (on our terms) at the CD; to call for the ratification of the US/Soviet Treaties of the 1970's on nuclear testing, with improved verification where necessary; and to highlight the potential for progress in US/Soviet nuclear reductions, as a sounder and more realistic basis for disarmament than the vision of a CTB. This is the approach you have already taken in your replies to Mr Gorbachev. I attach at Annex the sort of detailed lines I envisage should be deployed, including defensive material to counter the likely criticisms I identified earlier; I made a number of these points in my own speech to the Foreign Press Association in March (of which I attach the relevant extract).

14. George Younger and I would of course be very ready to discuss all this with you - or in OD.

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15. I am sending copies of this minute to colleagues in OD and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. Howe', written in a cursive style.

(GEOFFREY HOWE)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
2 June 1986

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CTB: UK Posture

1. The search for progress towards a CTB Treaty remains part of HMG's arms control policy.

2. However, given present capabilities, serious verification problems remain. Currently we lack the technical confidence necessary to ensure that nuclear tests at a militarily significant level could be detected, and distinguished from natural events. Cheating could go undetected, especially if every available subterfuge were employed and tests were conducted at sites whose characteristics are not familiar to us. Establishing an adequate verification regime also demands a political confidence that another country will not cheat. Such confidence, essential to complement technical capabilities, is at present lacking.

3. We hope to see further technical work at the CD, as proposed by the Western countries, on resolving some of these problems. We remain ready to contribute to this. We await further details, which have not yet been forthcoming, from the Russians at Geneva about the specific application of their ideas on verification. These could be helpful in making progress towards a clear-cut view as to whether the verification problem can be solved.

4. Meanwhile, we should focus on what is achievable in the near future. HMG's highest priority is to see significant cuts in offensive arsenals. The Gorbachev January proposals showed that the Russians share our view that this is the key area in nuclear disarmament.

5. Such reductions can not only enhance strategic stability at lower levels of forces and reduce burdens on economies. They can help to create a sounder and more confident East-West relationship. This will be essential if we are to resolve the

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technical and political problems inherent in establishing adequate verification for constraints both on nuclear testing and in other areas.

6. We strongly support the US readiness to move towards ratification of the Threshold Test Ban and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaties (of 1974 and 1976), provided verification capabilities can be improved. We also welcome their offer to exchange data and instrumentation with the Soviet Union. This step-by-step approach is likely to prove the most fruitful way forward. We urge the Soviet Union to cooperate, and are encouraged by slight signs of such a readiness on their part.

7. We are disappointed however at the greater Soviet emphasis placed on such unverifiable and declaratory gestures as the proclaimed moratorium. Our previous experience of such measures inspires little confidence in their utility. The current lull in the Soviet testing programme may conveniently coincide with their propaganda needs. But it provides no basis for a sound arms control agreement.

8. [Defensive] We recognise the theoretical argument that these (verification) problems might be resolved if negotiations were resumed. But in practice

- previous negotiations and current scientific evidence demonstrate that solutions are not yet visible, let alone achievable;
- the limited and conditional nature of the latest Gorbachev proposals on verification are no advance on previous Soviet positions;
- the US, France and China refuse to contemplate association with CTB negotiations in the near term. There is no reason to believe that a UK offer now of further negotiations would change this position;
- we should not put the cart before the horse. A resumption of negotiations would imply a confidence on our part in their success that is not at present justified.

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9. [Defensive] The position of the US Administration is clear, and needs no defence by HMG. Like us, they see fundamental difficulties over verification. Like us, they see a need to concentrate on arms control measures that can be achieved in the immediate future, most particularly, by reducing nuclear arsenals on both sides in a balanced and verifiable way, to the lowest levels consistent with the preservation of strategic stability and Western security.

10. [Defensive] In the continuing absence of a CTB HMG will take the necessary measures, including periodic testing when appropriate, to ensure that our national deterrent can perform the defensive task for which it is designed. In exactly the same way, the Labour Government conducted two tests in 1978, at the very time when the negotiations they were conducting with the US and the Soviet Union with the objective of concluding a CTB were at their peak of activity. The future preservation of our national deterrent would be an important element in our own conduct of any future negotiations to the same end. Our commitment to a CTB has always reflected our acceptance of the potential difficulties for the maintenance of effective nuclear forces that such an agreement could create. But that hypothetical issue does not need addressing in the present circumstances.

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"DEFENCE, DETERRENCE AND ARMS CONTROL"

Extract
from

*Text of speech by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary,
Sir Geoffrey Howe, to the Foreign Press Association in London
on 17 March.*

Nuclear
Testing

If Britain will not therefore play ball with the unilateral nuclear disarmers, could we not contribute by making a move on banning nuclear testing? Isn't verification now just an excuse anyhow? The short answer is "no"; it is a very real concern. We are talking about the security of this country. In other areas of the nuclear debate, the problems of verification are taken seriously. Mr Gorbachev himself says he takes them seriously. Only when it comes to testing, it seems, is there a less-than-serious approach. Time and again we have set out our reservations about the sort of verification regime that might apply to a comprehensive test ban. We have laid out the technical case, in detail, in papers tabled at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. Our critics have not bothered to answer; but you cannot resolve problems by ignoring them.

Every year thousands of natural events occur such as earthquakes which in seismic terms show similarities to nuclear tests. The similarities are crucial. Seismology alone offers us a real chance of verifying constraints on testing. So long as such events and nuclear tests both occur above a certain level of seismic activity, we can detect them and — equally important — we can distinguish between them. But below that level we lack the confidence necessary for effective verification. Can we both detect all nuclear tests and distinguish them from natural events? At present we doubt it. Some argue that the risks involved are acceptable. We disagree. The best scientific advice supports our view.

There are two key points to remember. First, our critics argue their case on the basis of the best possible conditions for detection. They ignore how little we know about areas where nuclear testing is not now conducted. They dismiss the possibilities for covert evasion. They forget that it is one thing to detect and identify high yield tests conducted at the sites we know about. It is quite another to try when the rules have been changed, when tests could be carried out with every possible subterfuge, and at a whole host of possible places. Second, we have never argued for one hundred percent, perfect verification. But, when we come to decide whether risks are acceptable, we have to make another assessment. We have in addition to weigh the odds that another party would cheat. This means making a political as well as a technical judgement. And if we are to conclude that verification provisions would be adequate we also need to be truly confident that others will abide by an agreement. In present circumstances, we are far from satisfied that such confidence would be justified.

Lately Mr Gorbachev and others have made much of his recent offer of some form of on-site inspection. But, as so often in the history of arms control, so-called new proposals can turn out to be the same old brew, merely warmed up to tickle the palates of those who have forgotten how it tasted before. Rather than making vague promises, which in the past have proved illusory, it is now up to the Russians to explain in detail what they mean. Better still, they should take up President Reagan's latest offer of discussions and a visit by experts on verification.

