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cc Minister Sec
2 Defence: Arms Control Talks
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From the Private Secretary

12 September 1983

Dear Brian,

POLICY ON ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

On 9 September the Prime Minister held a meeting at Chequers to review our policy in the field of arms control and disarmament. A list of those who attended is enclosed. The meeting had before it papers on (a) Arms Control: The Strategic Agenda; (b) Western Defence Strategy; (c) Nuclear and Conventional Force Arms Control; and (d) Multilateral Arms Control and Disarmament.

The purpose of this letter is to record the conclusions which were reached.

The question of whether it would be right at some stage to agree that the British strategic nuclear deterrent should be taken account of in arms control negotiations was discussed at length. It was noted that pressure was growing among our allies for us to find some way of doing so but it was by no means certain that they had thought through the implications.

It was clear that we must continue to resist the Soviet argument that the British and French strategic deterrents should be included in the INF negotiations. The question was rather whether there would be a case at some stage for including them in the START negotiations. At present the number of British (and French) strategic nuclear warheads was extremely small in relation to the known holdings of the super-powers. But decisions in the near future on Trident D5 procurement would be likely to result in due course in a significant increase in the Western holding of strategic warheads. This would lend more plausibility to the Soviet argument that the British and French deterrents were a major factor for them.

A key factor in determining whether there was any scope for taking account of the British deterrent in START was our estimate of the irreducible minimum holding of strategic nuclear weapons necessary to deter the Soviet Union. It was clear that the present Polaris deterrent could not be reduced. Officials were at present considering what the irreducible minimum would be in the Trident era in relation to the increased Soviet capability which we should then face. This would to some extent depend on eventual Ministerial decisions on the targetting of Trident.

/ It was recalled

It was recalled that while Polaris was indeed a weapon for use by the United Kingdom in a situation of last resort, it was also assigned to SACEUR who had the power to use it in situations short of last resort. This was one reason why some of our allies saw substance in the Soviet argument that the British deterrent should be included in negotiations. There was a need to find some way of making our position more plausible to our allies.

But great care was necessary. Any suggestion that the United Kingdom should participate in negotiations about strategic arms implied that we were willing to consider reducing our deterrent. Alternatively, it implied that the United States would emerge from such negotiations in a position of less than parity with the Soviet Union (and this was unrealistic since such an agreement would probably not be accepted by the US Congress).

It was agreed that there could be no question of making any move towards including our deterrent in arms control negotiations without the most thorough prior consultations with the United States. But whether any such move should be made depended on the outcome of the current work on the concept of the irreducible minimum. The Ministry of Defence were asked to consider how quickly that work could be completed (the current target of spring, 1983 was felt to be too distant) and to report.

Since it was clear that at least for the time being there could be no question of changing our present position, further thought needed to be given to the handling of public opinion on this question. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office were asked to consider urgently, together with the Ministry of Defence, and to report.

The task of the Alliance in retaining the support of public opinion could be greatly aided if current work resulted in an announcement in the autumn of a decision significantly to reduce the Alliance's holdings of battlefield nuclear weapons.

The present state of the MBFR negotiations was described and it was noted that Germany appeared to wish to make a significant departure from the West's position of insisting on agreement on data before reductions could be agreed. We had it in mind to make an alternative proposal which would avoid the dangers of the German proposal. This should be considered by Ministers (and the Prime Minister wishes to see the text).

Concern was expressed about the threat posed by Soviet chemical weapons holdings. The Secretary of State for Defence said that he proposed to put a paper to the Prime Minister about this matter.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister asked the Secretary to the Cabinet:

- (a) to circulate shortly a draft agenda of issues in the field of arms control and disarmament which Ministers would need to consider in the next three months;

- (b) to recommend how those issues might best be considered by Ministers;
- (c) to arrange for preparation by officials of the issues to be discussed.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever

John Cole.

Brian Fall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.