



MO 11/9/4

PRIME MINISTERBRITAIN AND ARMS CONTROL

The revised pack of papers for the Chequers meeting circulated by Mr Holmes under his letter of 23rd August includes an additional - and in my view important - note on 'The Strategic Agenda'. This raises some key questions which we might address. I believe that the third question - of whether there is a distinctive role for Britain - is the one, above all, that we must get right.

2. In the past we have avoided assuming a distinctive role. There have been good reasons for this: and we have had our successes in discreetly persuading allies to our point of view. But it seems to me that we may also have paid a high price for our anonymity. On all the evidence, there is widespread public support for a British security policy based on the twin propositions of strong defences - including nuclear weapons - and a multilateral approach to arms control. By contrast there is, in my view, much less satisfaction with actual achievements in arms control and much less understanding that the fault for this does not lie, in some undefined way, at the British Government's door. I believe that the lack of a distinctive role may have had quite a lot to do with this lack of understanding. Certainly increasingly the need for a British presence is being argued by the opposition parties.

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You will
want to read
this before the
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3. If there is this degree of difference in the level of public support for the two elements of our security policy, then we ought to take the difference seriously. At the least we could raise the level of support and understanding for our approach to arms control, and that would in my view powerfully reinforce support for our defence effort. But even more importantly we might bring a new mind and a more flexible approach to the quest for arms limitation itself.

4. I accept that, for a variety of reasons, a distinctive role for Britain can more easily lie in the field of strategic nuclear arms. In the case of other nuclear weapons, either the capabilities concerned are not ours or we provide a part of an Alliance contribution which it is unrealistic to imagine we could discuss separately from those of our allies. We must guard, however, against too rigidly compartmentalising the issues. We have a direct interest in other systems both in our own right and as a major basing country for US-owned INF; and at some stage an attempt may have to be made to strike a balance between the West and the Soviet Union on longer-range systems of all types below the level of the intercontinental systems of the super-powers. In addressing these issues, our first priority must be to maintain and develop the existing dialogue with the United States; but this need not preclude a wider role which both Germany and France, in their different ways and circumstances, both already perform.

5. It so happens that by early next year we shall have taken important decisions on the number of missiles and warheads to buy for Trident: and by then, or at any rate not long after, we may be seeing either the emergence of an outline START agreement (which could well read across to the British and/or French strategic systems) or some kind of interruption of the negotiating process brought about by the Russians which a British initiative might be seen to be helping to resolve. That we should be discussing our future role at your strategy meeting is therefore extremely timely.



6. In that discussion I accept of course that due weight must be given to the difficulties and risks associated with any change in our role. We must, for example, be careful not to arouse public expectations we cannot fulfil, and we must think through how to handle the Alliance, and in particular the Americans and the French. But when we are clear about what we propose to do about procuring missiles and warheads for Trident and therefore how we might give effect to the arms control undertakings in our Open Government Document 82/1, there would, it seems to me, then be an opportunity to talk directly to the Russians about our position. If in the process of taking that opportunity a more broadly based political dialogue with the Soviet Union were to begin, I for one would be very much in favour of it. One of the things that worries me most about the present security scene is the absence of such dialogue for which I think there can be no substitute if we are truly to get the measure of the Russians and be able to derive the right policies for dealing with them.

7. In the end we have to ask ourselves what really is the objective in British involvement in efforts to achieve arms control. Is it just cosmetic, as many of our domestic political opponents argue it is - something we do not out of conviction but because it is expected of us? Or are we genuinely trying to make the future safer than it will be if the present arms build-up continues in both East and West? However difficult it is to achieve I am convinced that the latter must be our objective. After all if we don't insist on a positive role in this field who else do we expect to do the task for us? And that requires a greater understanding of the Soviet Union and its motives than we have now. I believe that achieving that understanding - and all that would flow from it - is in the end a task which only Ministers can accomplish.

8. I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Sir Robert Armstrong.

COMMERCIAL

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