



Ministry of Defence

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Dear Sirs,

Thank you for your letter of 1 October 2015 to the Secretary of State for Defence. It has been passed to me in the Ministry of Defence as the points you raise on the nuclear deterrent fall under my area of responsibility.

The first responsibility of government is the protection and defence of the UK and its citizens. There are continuing risks to our security from, for example, the re-emergence of a major nuclear threat, emerging nuclear weapons states and from state-sponsored (nuclear) terrorism. We believe we can best protect ourselves against these threats by the continued operation of a minimum, credible nuclear deterrent. Accordingly, this Government has committed to maintain the Deterrent and to continue with the programme to renew it as debated and approved by a significant majority in Parliament in 2007 after the publication of the 2006 White Paper on the topic.

The UK views its possession of nuclear weapons as a strategic deterrent. In this sense we use them every day to deter potential adversaries, reassure allies and prevent nuclear blackmail and acts of aggression against our vital interests including our NATO Allies that cannot be countered by other means. We hope never to employ nuclear weapons but to deliver a deterrent effect under all foreseeable circumstances. Our nuclear deterrent seeks to influence a potential adversary's decision making that the consequences of any nuclear blackmail or nuclear attack on UK or our vital interests, including our NATO Allies, will far outweigh any benefits they expect to achieve.

The UK would employ nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence and would not use any of our weapons contrary to international law, including those relating to the conduct of armed conflict. I note that you specifically cite provisions in the first Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions. Please note that the UK Declaration on ratification of the first Additional Protocol included the following reservation:

"It continues to be the understanding of the United Kingdom that the rules introduced by the Protocol apply exclusively to conventional weapons without prejudice to any other rules of international law applicable to other types of weapons. In particular, the rules so introduced do not have any effect on and do not regulate or prohibit the use of nuclear weapons."

Notwithstanding this, the Government accepts that, as stated in paragraph 84 of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons published on the 8 July 1996, "all States are bound by those rules in Additional Protocol I which, when adopted, were merely the expression of the pre-existing customary law, such as the Martens clause, reaffirmed in the first article of Additional Protocol I".

In reference to your comments regarding the 'immediate ability to launch', the UK's nuclear weapons are not on high alert, nor are they at "launch on warning" status. The patrolling submarine operates routinely at a "notice to fire" that is measured in days, rather than the few minutes 'Quick Reaction Alert' that was maintained throughout the Cold War. Moreover, the missiles are no longer targeted at any country (they have been de-targeted since 1994). This position was considered and re-affirmed during the work on the 2006 White Paper which stated that our submarine on deterrent patrol is normally at several days notice to fire. We believe that a nuclear attack on the UK's vital interests is deterred by demonstrating our capability to respond under any circumstances, rather than just by a capability for a rapid response. There is no immediacy of launch in our normal operating posture.

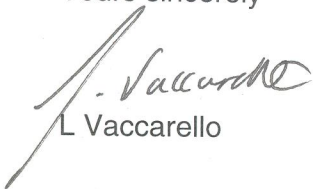
In your letter you make the comment 'our so-called "independent nuclear deterrent"'. Let me assure you the UK has an operationally independent minimum nuclear deterrent. All decision-making and use of the system remains entirely sovereign to the UK and only the Prime Minister can authorise the use of the UK's nuclear deterrent, even if the missiles are to be fired as part of a NATO response. Any instruction to fire would be transmitted to the submarine using only UK codes and UK equipment.

It should be noted that that the UK is widely recognised as the most forward-leaning of the nuclear weapon states on nuclear disarmament and is committed to maintaining only a minimum credible deterrent. We have reduced the size of our own nuclear forces by well over 50% since our Cold War peak and our nuclear arsenal represents about 1% of the total global stockpile of nuclear weapons. Indeed the Secretary of State for Defence announced in January that we had reduced the number of warheads on each of our deployed ballistic missile submarines from 48 to 40 and the number of operational missiles on each of those submarines to no more than 8. We are continuing work to reduce our overall nuclear warhead stockpile to no more than 180 by the mid-2020s.

Please be assured that the UK is committed to the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons and zero tolerance of proliferation. However, while we have repeatedly reduced the size of our deterrent, there remain some 17,000 nuclear weapons globally. Our assessment of the potential security environment over the next few decades shows that these large arsenals of nuclear weapons are likely to remain and that nuclear proliferation may continue, in spite of our best endeavours. We cannot discount the risk that a nuclear threat to us or our vital interests will emerge in the future and we therefore judge that a minimum nuclear deterrent is likely to remain an important element of our national and NATO's security.

I hope that this letter addresses your concerns.

Yours sincerely



L Vaccarello