



Ministry of Defence

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Ref: D/CBRNPOL/20160208

8 February 2016

Dear Ms McGrath,

Thank you for your letter of December 2015 to the Secretary of State for Defence in which raise a number of concerns about the UK's nuclear deterrent. As the official responsible I have been asked to reply.

Firstly, I thought it would be helpful to set out our deterrent policy. The first responsibility of government is the protection 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 2007 after the publication of the 2006 White paper on the topic. At the November 2015 debate in the Commons, a Scottish National Party (SNP) motion opposing Trident's renewal was defeated by 330 votes to 64.

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 the 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. You have stated that our nuclear deterrent runs contrary to the UK's obligations under the Geneva Convention to protect 'civilian populations' and 'natural environments'. Please note that the UK Declaration on ratification of the first Additional Protocol (which includes Article 51 (protection of the civilian population) & Article 55 (protection of the natural environment)) to the Geneva Convention (1977) 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"

Please be assured that the UK is committed to achieving the long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons and continues to work with our Allies and partners to try to make nuclear weapons less necessary, with the goal of making them unnecessary. The UK considers the Non-proliferation Treaty to be the cornerstone of global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote safe and secure use of civil nuclear energy and pursue the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, otherwise known as the Grand Bargain. The UK is committed to retaining only the minimum destructive power necessary to achieve our deterrence objectives and have reduced the size of our own nuclear forces by well over 50% since our Cold War peak. Our nuclear arsenal represents about 1% of the total global stockpile of nuclear weapons.

However, while we have repeatedly reduced the size of our deterrent there remain some 17,000 nuclear weapons globally and it would be irresponsible to disarm unilaterally while the capability to threaten us with nuclear weapons remains.

Therefore, 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 this explains the position.

Yours sincerely

C Clapham CBRN Policy Deterrence
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