



The Rt. Hon. James Cleverly MP
Minister of State
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

12 March 2020

Dear Mr Cleverly,

The 2020 NPT Review Conference

As you will know, the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee takes a keen interest in issues relating to nuclear risk, non-proliferation and disarmament.

The then International Relations Committee published a report, *Rising nuclear risk, disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*,¹ in April 2019. This noted the successes of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but also that global progress towards disarmament had stalled. While acknowledging that the prevention of proliferation must remain a priority, we identified the principal cause of the rising risk of nuclear use to be the continued, and at times expanding, reliance of nuclear possessor states on their nuclear weapons.

In follow up to that report, and ahead of the NPT's 50th anniversary Review Conference (RevCon) in April and May this year, we took evidence on this topic on 26 February. This letter raises key issues for the Government to consider as it prepares for the RevCon.

We are grateful to our witnesses—Samantha Job, Director, Defence and International Security, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Sarah Price, Head, Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre, James Franklin, Nuclear Policy Deputy Director, Defence Nuclear Organisation, Ministry of Defence, Dr Heather Williams, Lecturer in Defence Studies, King's College London, and Marion Messmer, Co-Director, BASIC—for their time and expertise.

The P5

The Committee continues to attach considerable weight to the contribution of the NPT to global security. In our report we highlighted the important role the P5 group should play in demonstrating the commitment of the five Nuclear Weapon States to the aims of the NPT.

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/33802.htm>

In this context, we were pleased to hear from our witnesses that the Government had taken its role as the chair of the P5 seriously, and used this forum to good effect. We are encouraged that the five governments “reaffirmed their commitment to the Treaty”.² We also welcome the efforts of the P5, led by the UK, to engage with civil society as part of this process, the transparency of which was rightly praised by Dr Williams and Ms Messmer.

In our 2019 report, we concluded that the level of nuclear risk had increased, and that steps to mitigate this risk should be of the highest priority for the Government. We welcome the recognition by the Government, and the other P5 states that there is an urgent need to engage in dialogue on strategic risk reduction.³ We continue to believe that the importance of the principle that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”⁴ has not diminished. We hope that the Government will publicly endorse this view at RevCon, and do its best to persuade other P5 members to do likewise.

We also welcome work done at the P5 level to better understand nuclear doctrines and policies. We agree with Ms Job that this is an important part of efforts to “demystify and reduce risk.”⁵ We would welcome an account of the planned side event at RevCon on this topic, after it has been held.

Notwithstanding the important work done by the Government and its P5 counterparts to reaffirm their support for the NPT, since the publication of the Committee’s report in April 2019 there have been a number of concerning events in global nuclear politics that will make negotiations at RevCon more difficult. We set these out in turn below.

Iran

The Committee is concerned by rising regional tensions in the Gulf, in particular between the United States and Iran. In this regard, I refer you to my exchange of letters with your predecessor, Dr Andrew Murrison MP, on 8 and 15 October.⁶ These tensions, which have come perilously close to an open regional conflict, coupled with further undermining of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), threaten global security. In particular, Iran’s recent threat to withdraw from the NPT,⁷ which Ms Messmer told us we should take “enormously seriously”,⁸ demonstrates how this situation puts at risk global efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and secure multilateral disarmament.

The best way to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability is a negotiated agreement, which will require continued diplomacy. We recognise and welcome efforts by the Government, in collaboration with France and Germany in the E3 format, to defend the Iran nuclear deal. Ms Job told us that the reason the Government chose to activate the deal’s Dispute Resolution Mechanism was to maintain the opportunity to “have a

² Samantha Job, [Q1](#)

³ Samantha Job, [Q1](#)

⁴ Known as the Reagan–Gorbachev doctrine.

⁵ Samantha Job, [Q1](#)

⁶ <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/International-Relations-Committee/correspondence/Letter-from-Rt-Hon-Dr%20Murrison-to-Baroness%20Anelay-15-October-2019.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-zarif/if-nuclear-issue-is-referred-to-un-iran-will-pull-out-of-the-npt-iran-foreign-minister-idUSKBN1ZJ0YK>

⁸ Marion Messmer, [Q17](#)

conversation” with Iran.⁹ We support this approach, and urge the Government to continue to encourage Iranian and US compliance with the deal.

Arms control

In our 2019 report, we concluded that the “world is dangerously close to an era without arms control, which would increase the risk of nuclear use.” A year on, following the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and with serious questions over the future of other treaties—such as New START and the Open Skies Treaty—we have moved closer to that era. Dr Williams urged us to prepare for a “world without arms control.”¹⁰

Dr Williams told us she believed the US Administration was “genuinely undecided” on the question of whether to seek the extension of New START. She said that if the treaty was not extended, “questions” would be raised over the US and Russia’s commitment to disarmament under Article VI of the NPT.¹¹ We were pleased to hear from Ms Job that the Government sees “value” in New START, and that the Government engages with “the US system” on the Treaty.¹²

While not a nuclear arms control treaty, we regard the Open Skies Treaty to be an important confidence building measure between states in the Euro-Atlantic area, four of which possess nuclear weapons. We were pleased to hear from Ms Job that the Government remains “fully supportive” of the Treaty, and that it regards the treaty to provide important “operational, technical and strategic communications benefits”.¹³

As the US continues to consider its options with regard to the future of New START and the Open Skies Treaty, we urge the Government to make a case to the US Administration, at the highest possible level, that these treaties contribute substantially to strategic stability and should be maintained.

RevCon 2020 and beyond

Marking the 50th anniversary of the NPT, this year’s RevCon represents an important opportunity for all States Parties to reaffirm their commitment to the Treaty, and to discuss challenges facing efforts to prevent proliferation and pursue meaningful disarmament. In that context, we welcome the recent joint statement by the P5 foreign ministers.¹⁴ Our 2019 report recommended that, to demonstrate the UK’s commitment to the NPT, the Government should consider representation at RevCon by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. That remains our view. We would welcome an update from you on the composition of the official delegation to the RevCon.

In addition to the important preparations for the RevCon, the Government should also give consideration to steps that can be taken in the next five years, in the run up to the 2025

⁹ Samantha Job, [Q5](#)

¹⁰ Heather Williams, [Q16](#)

¹¹ Heather Williams, [Q16](#)

¹² Samantha Job, [Q4](#)

¹³ Samantha Job, [Q4](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-the-fiftieth-anniversary-of-the-treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons>

RevCon, to alleviate tensions in global nuclear politics. We believe that a dialogue on strategic stability between the members of the P5, both bilaterally and collectively, could contribute to that aim.

Ms Job told us that the issue of nuclear risk will be considered as part of the Government's Integrated Review process,¹⁵ which will be an important opportunity for the Government to take stock of the significant nuclear challenges facing the world, and consider and agree further steps the UK can take in support of the aims of the NPT.

Transparency

We welcome the Government's commitment to transparency in its work to support the NPT, and welcomed the opportunity to hear from officials in this regard. However, good work on transparency in one area of nuclear policy can be undermined by the lack of it in another. As Members of the Committee raised at the evidence session, it was regrettable that Parliamentarians learned that the Government had committed to renew its nuclear warheads from remarks by the Commander of US Strategic Command, published in the press, rather than from the Government.

We note the Secretary of State for Defence's written statement on this issue on 25 February,¹⁶ and Mr Franklin's clear statement that "the Government have made the decision to replace their [nuclear] warhead."¹⁷ We urge the Government to reflect on the concerns expressed by this Committee, and other parliamentarians, about how this sensitive issue was handled, and seek to provide the maximum possible transparency on issues relating to the UK's nuclear weapons policy in future.

I have copied this letter to Baroness Goldie, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence.

Yours, as ever



Baroness Anelay of St Johns
Chair, International Relations and Defence Committee

¹⁵ Samantha Job, [Q11](#)

¹⁶ HCWS125 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-02-25/HCWS125/>

¹⁷ James Franklin, [Q1](#)