



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office



Department
for International
Development

25 March 2020

The Rt Hon. Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE
Chair of the International Relations and Defence Committee
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

Dear Lady Anelay

Thank you for your letter of 12 March about the 2020 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in follow up to the International Relations and Defence Committee's evidence session on this topic on 26 February. Since the publication of the Committee's report in April 2019, we have valued our increased engagement with you on these important issues. I am pleased that this engagement continues.

NPT Review Conference

The global impact of COVID-19 has forced the United Nations to cancel or postpone multiple high-profile events in New York, Geneva and Vienna. The NPT Review Conference, which was scheduled to start on 27 April, has been postponed; Member States will decide a new date in the coming weeks. We fully support the UN's decision to put safety first, and will continue to engage with the NPT Bureau and the wider NPT community on suitable and realistic timeframes for the Review Conference.

Nonetheless, our work is certainly not paused.

P5 Process

I was very pleased to hear positive feedback from the Committee on the Government's approach to chairing the P5 Process. The five Nuclear Weapon States have a special responsibility with regard to the NPT; this process is an important opportunity to demonstrate confidence not only in each other, but also in the NPT itself. I am grateful for your recognition of the recent P5 Foreign Ministers' statement to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the NPT. This high-level statement signals the importance we collectively attach to this Treaty.

The Government will continue efforts on strategic risk reduction and doctrines, irrespective of when the NPT Review Conference will take place. We will continue our expert-level P5 discussions on our respective nuclear doctrines, which we had always envisaged continuing post-Review Conference. We will also continue our efforts to deepen our dialogue with the P5 and with Non-Nuclear Weapon States on strategic risk reduction. This will focus on developing practical discussions around the following key areas:

- Building trust and confidence;
- Building understanding and reducing the risk of miscalculation;
- Reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation; and
- Safety and security.

We acknowledge the interest shown by the Committee in the Reagan-Gorbachev quote on nuclear war, and we are continuing to examine language that the P5 can collectively agree on risk reduction.

Transparency

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the Government's work on transparency in advance of the NPT Review Conference. As you will know, we have increased our efforts to engage with Parliamentarians, civil society, Non-Nuclear Weapon States and the wider NPT community. The Government's National Report on our obligations under the NPT is part of this transparency exercise, and we have very much welcomed thoughts from the NPT community on the direction of the report. We are reviewing the report's publication date, given the delay to the Review Conference.

In the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR15) we stated that a replacement warhead would not be required until at least the late 2030s but that a decision would be required sooner. Since then, we have continued to provide Parliament with annual updates on the future nuclear deterrent, including the work being undertaken to inform the warhead decision. The formal announcement to Parliament that we will replace the warhead marks the next phase in ensuring the UK maintains an independent, minimum, credible, nuclear deterrent in accordance with the Government's policy.

With regard to the timing of the Written Ministerial Statement, we agree that it is regrettable that Parliament learned of the Government's decision to replace the UK's nuclear warhead through media reporting before being formally informed. Our timelines for informing Parliament were planned to align with the US budget submission and in advance of any US testimony citing a UK programme, but unfortunately, this was not possible. We have informed Parliament at the earliest opportunity following the US Congressional testimony.

Please be assured that the Government is committed to transparency on our nuclear deterrent, so far as is consistent with national security considerations. The UK's nuclear policy was explained in SDSR15 and, as you will know, the Government is currently undertaking an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, which will be underpinned by the commitment the Government has already made, including maintaining a nuclear deterrent. We will also continue to publish annual updates to Parliament on the UK's Future Nuclear Deterrent, outlining progress made in delivering the new Dreadnought Class submarines and including updates on the replacement warhead as appropriate.

Arms Control

The Government regularly raises arms control, including New START and the Open Skies Treaty, with the US Government. The Foreign Secretary spoke with US National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien, earlier this year, during his visit to the United States, and regularly speaks to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. We discussed arms control with P5 representatives at the recent P5 Conference in London and we engage regularly with the US through official level bilateral and NATO channels.

We openly recognise the value of New START for its verification regime, which provides important insights, and the fact that it creates dialogue on nuclear capabilities between the US and Russia. However, we also recognise its limitations and equally support the principle of US efforts to extend arms control to cover emerging technologies and the growing capabilities of China as a nuclear power. As Samantha Job informed the Committee, *"[New START] does not cover some of the missiles and technologies that Russia has announced it is going to have"* – or indeed has recently brought into service, such as the hypersonic Avangard. The Government also remains fully committed to the Open Skies Treaty, which helps build understanding and confidence. We continue to engage with all Allies and partners on measures to strengthen the Treaty.

As the US Government considers its options with regard to arms control the Government will continue to use our special relationship with the US to ensure our opinion is heard at all levels.

Iran

On Iran, we are committed to using the Dispute Resolution Mechanism in good faith. We want to work with all parties to the deal to find a diplomatic way forward. This includes encouraging the US and Iran to come to the table for a new and longer term deal. In addition to Iran's nuclear activity, a comprehensive deal would need to cover a range of issues, including Iranian destabilising activity in the region and proliferation to non-state actors.

We look forward to continuing our engagement with the Committee as we plan for the NPT Review Conference and beyond. The Government will update the Committee with our plans once a new date for the Review Conference has been agreed.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'JC', written in a cursive style.

The Rt Hon. James Cleverly MP
Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa