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From the Private Secretary

10 April 1984

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SOVIET CONCERN ABOUT A SURPRISE NATO ATTACK

The Prime Minister held an ad hoc meeting today which was attended by the Lord President, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, Sir Robert Armstrong, Mr. Patrick Wright and "C".

The purpose of the meeting was to consider what action should be taken about the conclusions of the Joint Intelligence Committee in JIC(84)(N)45 of 23 March, 1984 and in particular the Committee's conclusion that the available evidence appeared "to reflect a disturbing state of mind in the Soviet leadership which seems to accept the possibility that the United States might initiate nuclear war, and that this might be done through a surprise attack, perhaps under cover of an exercise".

The Prime Minister recalled that in her conversations with Communist leaders, especially during her visit to Hungary, she had tried to impress upon them the sincerity of the desire of the West for disarmament and the fact that NATO was a defensive organisation which threatened no one. The leaders in question seemed to find it hard to accept these points. This attitude, taken together with the JIC report, presented a disturbing picture. We should consider what could be done to remove the danger that, by mis-calculating Western intentions, the Soviet Union would over-react.

Mr. Wright explained that there had been some difference of view in the JIC on the weight to be put on the Soviet reaction to exercise Able Archer. Those reactions did not contain elements which could be expected to have been present if the Soviet bloc were really nervous about Western intentions.

/The Foreign and Commonwealth

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The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that, taking account of the evidence and having weighed the possibility that we were the object of a Soviet disinformation exercise, he felt that the JIC conclusions must be accepted. It was desirable to discuss the conclusions with the US Government, making it clear that we had considered but were inclined to dismiss the idea that we were witness to a Soviet attempt at disinformation. The United States had considered the various reports and had apparently taken them into account in deciding recently to announce publicly a Naval exercise which would be starting this week.

It was noted that the reports appeared to date increased Soviet apprehension of Western intentions to at least as far back as spring 1981. It might be that the main cause of Soviet fears was the succession of rather threatening statements made by President Reagan after he had taken office.

Attention was drawn to the recent large-scale Soviet Naval exercise; also to the Soviet decision not to receive, at an appropriate level in Moscow, General Scowcroft of the US Administration (the Prime Minister felt that insufficient attention might have been paid to the significance of the latter point). On the other hand, it was pointed out that the Russians had just notified the United States for the first time of ICBM flights within the Soviet Union.

Discussion then turned to the action to be taken on the JIC report. It was agreed that officials should meet urgently to consider the nature of an approach to the United States, including the question of how the Americans might be advised to handle this matter with the Soviet Union. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary would discuss our concerns with Mr. Shultz at the two meetings he expected to have with him in May. In preparation for this, HM Ambassador, Washington, would be instructed to go over the ground with the US State Department.

There was a more general need to continue and perhaps intensify HMG's efforts to promote an atmosphere of greater confidence between East and West. The Minister for Trade would visit Moscow in May. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary would go there in July for discussions with Mr. Gromyko and planned to visit some of the Eastern European countries in September. It was for consideration whether the Prime Minister should invite a senior member of the Politbureau, perhaps Mr. Gorbachev, to visit this country later in the year. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary was invited to consider whether it would be wise to accelerate our programme of contacts with the Soviet Union. The Prime Minister stressed that we should seek to maintain the momentum created by her own visit to Hungary and the Soviet Union.

I am copying this letter to Janet Lewis-Jones (Lord President's Office), Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence), Sir Robert Armstrong, Mr. Wright and "C".

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K. J. COLES