

Internal note from the FCO concerning the WEU Assembly Report on SALT III and the British and French nuclear forces (London, 23 October 1980)

Caption: On 21 October 1980, the Defence Department in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) issues an internal note in which it summarises a telephone conversation between Joep Mommersteeg, former Dutch State Secretary for Defence and Member of the Western European Union (WEU) Assembly, and Douglas Hurd, British Minister for Europe. Joep Mommersteeg wants to discuss some aspects of his report drafted on behalf of the WEU Assembly on SALT III and the British and French nuclear forces. The discussion with Douglas Hurd focuses on the UK's interest in increasing cooperation with France on defence matters and on the level of independence of Britain's nuclear deterrent. Hurd underlines that the British nuclear weapons targeting policy is based on the criteria outlined by SACEUR, but that the United Kingdom did retain the right to use the weapons unilaterally in a supreme national emergency. Regarding cooperation with France, the Prime Minister's recent message to French President Giscard d'Estaing signals his general interest in defence cooperation.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Western Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western European Department: Registered Files (R and WR Series). WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION. Western European Union Assembly recommendation 360: Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) and the British and French nuclear forces. 01/01/1981-31/12/1981, FCO 33/5237 (Former Reference Dep: WRU 83/1).

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Last updated: 25/10/2016

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CALLS ON MR HURD AND MR MOBERLY BY MR MOMMERSTEEG

1. As you know, Mr Mommersteeg called at the FCO on 21 October to discuss aspects of his report on 'SALT III and the British and French Nuclear Forces'.
2. With Mr Hurd, Mr Mommersteeg alluded to Sir R Hibbert's remarks reflected in Le Monde, that the UK was interested in cooperation with France on defence questions, including nuclear matters. Mr Mommersteeg was interested to know whether the Ambassador's remarks, taken together with the Prime Minister's speech in Bordeaux, reflected specific cooperation initiatives on the part of the UK. Mr Hurd said that they did not; but defence was an important field and, as the two European nuclear powers, it was to be expected that France and we would have things in common. Mr Mommersteeg pressed Mr Hurd on the subject of ~~joint~~ ~~double~~ targetting and deployment; he also suggested that it would make sense for France and the UK to cooperate on the construction, for example, of submarine hulls for their submarine-based deterrent systems. Mr Hurd repeated that all this was rather far down the cooperative road and that the Prime Minister's message to President Giscard had been a general signal of interest in defence cooperation.
3. Pursuing the line reflected in the preceding paragraph, Mr Mommersteeg speculated that British military nuclear technology must, in several areas, be in advance of the French. Would not, he wondered, Anglo-French collaboration be a matter of some sensitivity for the Americans? Mr Hurd acknowledged that it might be.
4. Mr Mommersteeg also tackled the general question of the rational of the United Kingdom deterrent. Did it mean that we were not absolutely sure of the American commitment to Europe? Mr Hurd said that there was, of course, the theoretical possibility that US and British perceptions of the need to use the strategic deterrent might not, in some circumstances, coincide; but it was the 'second decision centre' argument to which we attached prime importance. Finally, Mr Mommersteeg questioned Mr Hurd about the 'independence' of the UK deterrent. Mr Hurd emphasized that it was targetted in accordance with SACEUR's plans, but that we also reserved the right to use the weapons unilaterally in supreme national emergency.
5. Mr Mommersteeg discussed TNF arms control with Mr Moberly and I do not propose to record the details of the talk, which covered standard ground. Mr Mommersteeg, as befits a Dutchman, was particularly concerned with battlefield nuclear weapons and argued strongly that the existence of large numbers of battlefield weapons in NATO's hands was not a deterrent but actually increased the likelihood of nuclear war.

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23 October 1980