

Letter from Reginald Hibbert to Sir Michael Palliser on France’s nuclear deterrent policy (Paris, 21 December 1981)

Caption: On 21 December 1981, Reginald Hibbert, the United Kingdom’s Ambassador to France, sends a letter to Sir Michael Palliser, Permanent Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), in response to a question by the FCO on France’s relative immunity to the anti-nuclear weapons protests which have spread throughout Europe and Britain. During the Euromissiles crisis, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), a British organisation, holds massive demonstrations calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament by the United Kingdom, international nuclear disarmament and tighter international arms regulation. The British Ambassador analyses the background of France’s nuclear deterrent policy and explains the fundamental principles on which this policy is based.

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. British policy towards the Western European Union. 01/01/1981-31/12/1981, FCO 33/5232 (Former Reference Dep: WRU 22/1).

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/letter_from_reginald_hibbert_to_sir_michael_palliser_on_france_s_nuclear_deterrent_policy_paris_21_december_1981-en-38efc832-4a7e-48ca-a07f-ofd1f36e95d9.html



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BRITISH EMBASSY,
PARIS

21 December 1981

Sir Michael Palliser GCMG
PUS
FCO

Had defence dept for

Mr. Curran
Mr. Amman

(C) Hd/WEI

Mr. Gullmore
Mr. A. Acland

Mr. Bullard

RS/PUS

23/12

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Best Michael,

All Ref. letters
Below.

1. Thank you for your letter of 23 November about France and the defence of Europe. Since then I have seen Nicko Henderson's letter to you of 1 December and your reply to him of 14 December, and now I have also seen Ronald Arculus' postscript to the correspondence of 10 December.

2. I am not tempted to comment on these last three letters other than to say that I was pleased to see your reply to Nicko. I write now because your letter to me of 23 November asked one specific question related to France: is the relative immunity of France to the "Peace/CND" virus a direct result of France's "independent" defence posture and "genuinely independent", if questionably deterrent, nuclear deterrent?

3. I do not think there is a simple answer to this question. First of all France, as your question suggests, is only relatively immune. At the moment it is more immune than others in Europe, but the French government is afraid that the infection might spread into France. I have no doubt myself that France's independent posture in the world, which includes more than simply defence and nuclear aspects, has the effect of making the defence policy of successive French governments less politically controversial. In France, national feeling is deliberately aroused by governments and performs an important political function in holding together a nation which would otherwise show signs of deep division. A people which has its national feeling steadily aroused and kept at a lively level of excitation tends to find it natural that it should have fully equipped defence capabilities which may not be to everyone's liking outside France but which assure to France the capacity to be independent. For those outside France, including of course the British Government, the hollowness and contradictions of the French attitude are more obvious than they are to the French people themselves. Every nation tends to cherish its


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own myths and independence is very much a leading myth in France, even if that independence can be seen by others to be largely a fiction. I would naturally not wish Britain or other NATO member countries to indulge in a similar fiction of independence. But it seems to me that it ought to be possible to strike a satisfactory national note without necessarily insisting on an excessive degree of independence. I think the lesson to be drawn from France is that a great deal can be done to make a medium-sized country's defence policy acceptable to the general public if the national note is struck as much as possible. The balance which ought to be found between "national" defence and "NATO" defence is a delicate one. The Federal Republic of Germany, for special historical reasons well known to all of us, is largely debarred from striking any national note. The population of the FRG, particularly the young people of Germany, live in a continuous crisis of identity, and it is not surprising that the FRG seems to suffer most acutely from the "Peace/CND" virus. Britain does not suffer from the same historical disability; but my personal view is that there has tended over the years to be too much emphasis on the NATO factor and too little on the national factor in the discussion of defence policy in Britain. This is partly because successive governments, especially Labour governments, have found short-cuts to the solution of parliamentary difficulties by emphasising the treaty obligation to NATO rather than the genuine national responsibility and self-interest in some of the measures which Britain has adopted. My answer is therefore that I would like to see a more national note struck in defence matters than has been customary in the UK, while not having it carried to the lengths to which it is carried in France, ie to the point of insisting on "independence".

4. Perhaps I should add that it looks as though French opinion, while highly sensitised about national independence, is prepared to accept the idea of European defence cooperation. So far this is no more than an idea: no-one in France tries to elaborate theoretical forms of European defence collaboration. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the idea is important and could, with time and patience, be exploited.

5. More generally I was happy to see paragraph 12 of your letter, although in fact I would have been content with something even less specific. It has long seemed to me that what is most important is the attitude of mind on the British side of the Channel if progress is to be made in dealings with France. The desirable attitude of mind was admirably expressed by Mrs Thatcher in her speech at the colloquy organised by the Franco/British Council at Bordeaux last year. Her expression on that occasion of a readiness to work with France in defence matters has not been forgotten in France, although it has never been elaborated. The attitude of mind required is one which ceases to insist that only NATO is good (because France will never rejoin NATO as an organisation) and which always holds the door

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open for talk about defence cooperation with France, even if it is not possible to say specifically where such talk might lead. I am well aware of the danger that the approach has to be patient and subtle, because France is entirely capable of reacting negatively as soon as overtures are made to her, even of the most generalised kind. The aim should be to seize hold of France's more or less empty protestations of willingness to work with neighbours and slowly oblige her to fill them with meaning. One day, if everyone worked with sufficient skill and patience, it might be possible to loosen up the present rigid distribution of conventional forces on the ground in Europe so that some of the acute problems which beset the British defence budget, to the great disadvantage of the British Navy, might be alleviated.

6. As regards the last paragraph of your letter to Nicko Henderson of 14 December, you will know from my correspondence with Antony Acland that I have been urging the desirability of an early bilateral meeting between Mr Nott and M. Hernu. It is of course at that level or at the level of heads of government that a general exchange of ideas with France on defence matters ought to be begun. It is of course a matter for judgment, which can be made only in London, whether the first meeting between Mr Nott and M. Hernu will be suitable for this purpose.

Yours sincerely,

Reginald Hibbert

cc: Sir Jock Taylor KCMG, Bonn
Sir Nicholas Henderson GCMG, Washington
Sir Ronald Arculus KCMG KCVO, Rome
Sir Clive Rose GCMG, UKDEL NATO, Brussels

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