



Ministry
of Defence

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Our Ref: FOI2020/07970

[REDACTED]

4 August 2020

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your letter dated 3 June 2020 requesting:

“...information regarding the current operational deployment and command and control structure of the United Kingdom’s Strategic Nuclear Deterrent capability.

.....

Specifically...responses to the following questions:

- 1. Whilst it is my understanding that only the British Prime Minister can authorise the use of Nuclear Weapons, in the unlikely event that the Prime Minister were incapacitated to the extent that he/she would be unable to issue launch commands, on whose immediate civilian (ie. Governmental/Political) authority would launch authorisation pass to (For example, the Defence Secretary)?*
- 2. Would there ever conceivably be a set of circumstances whereby a most senior (land-based) military officer would have command authority to launch nuclear weapons (For example, the Chief of the Defence Staff)?*
- 3. Does a pre-planned contingency exist whereby the Captain of a Royal Navy Trident Nuclear Submarine would have sole authority (at their discretion) to launch nuclear weapons at pre-determined primary or secondary targets (therefore bypassing the pre-established chain of command)?*
- 4. Would the authorisation command for the strategic use of UK nuclear weapons ever, in any circumstances, be devolved to NATO or the United States?*
- 5. How often is the present classified system of launch protocols reviewed?*
- 6. How many times a year do the Royal Navy crews of the Vanguard Class Trident Nuclear Submarines conduct nuclear launch simulation exercises?*
- 7. Has there ever been any consideration – either in the past – or in the future to the United Kingdom developing and deploying a land-based (ICBM) missile delivery system for strategic nuclear weapons?*
- 8. In the light of recent advanced (air and surface-launched) tactical nuclear weapons capability (particularly by Russia), is the United Kingdom currently, or planning in the future, to develop/commission any new conventional or nuclear weapons/delivery platforms (other*

than the present sole sub-surface launched Trident nuclear weapons system) to counter such threats?

9. *Whilst it is now universally acknowledged that a number of Royal Navy ships – which formed part of the Task Force deployed in 1982 to re-capture the Falkland Islands – carried nuclear weapons (in the form of depth charges – believed designated WE-177c), how many nuclear weapons in total were operationally deployed aboard ships during the the South-Atlantic Campaign?”*

We have treated your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ('the Act').

Questions 1-6

A search for the information has been conducted within the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and we can confirm that MOD holds information about command and control of the nuclear deterrent and nuclear deterrent submarine operations. However, the information falls within the scope of the qualified exemptions provided for at sections 24 (National Security) and 26 (Defence) of the Act and has been withheld.

Sections 24 and 26 are qualified exemptions and are subject to public interest testing which means that the information requested can only be withheld if the public interest in doing so outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Section 24(1) of the Act provides that information is exempt from disclosure if exemption is required for the purposes of safeguarding national security. The nuclear deterrent exists to deter the most extreme threats to our national security, which cannot be deterred by other means. Release of information would demonstrate the Department's commitment to transparency and openness on defence nuclear matters and could assure the public of the capability and effectiveness of the deterrent. However, information relating to nuclear deterrent submarine operations and command and control structures may be of use to potential adversaries, and the balance of public interest was found to be in favour of withholding the information.

Section 26(1)(a) of the Act provides that information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice the defence of the British Isles or any colony, and Section 26(1)(b) provides that information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces. The arguments for and against release are very similar to those for Section 24(1) and the balance of public interest was found to be in favour of withholding the information as disclosure would prejudice the defence of the UK and the capability and effectiveness of the Armed Forces.

Under Section 16(1) of the Act whereby public authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance to requestors, you may find it helpful to note the following:

As stated in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf), only the Prime Minister can authorise the launch of nuclear weapons, which ensures that political control is maintained at all times, and the UK's nuclear deterrent is fully operationally independent.

Question 7

A search for the information has been conducted within the MOD and we can confirm that MOD holds information relevant to this question. However, this information has been withheld under section 21 (Information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means) of the Act.

Under Section 16(1) of the Act, you may find the Trident Alternatives Review, which was published in 2013, helpful. The review can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trident-alternatives-review>.

Question 8

A search for the information has been conducted within the MOD and we can confirm that MOD holds information relevant to this question. However, this information has been withheld under section 21 (Information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means) of the Act.

Under Section 16(1) of the Act, you may find it helpful to note that the MOD publishes an Equipment Plan each year, detailing plans for defence capabilities over a rolling ten-year period. The most recent of these, covering the ten years from 2019, is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-defence-equipment-plan-2019>.

MOD also publishes an annual update to Parliament on the progress of the Dreadnought programme which will replace the four Vanguard class nuclear-armed submarines, the most recent of which is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-united-kingdoms-future-nuclear-deterrent-the-2019-update-to-parliament>.

Additionally, in February this year, the Secretary of State for Defence announced the programme to replace the UK's nuclear warhead. This announcement can be found at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-02-25/debates/20022539000010/NuclearDeterrent>.

Question 9

A search for the information has been conducted within the MOD. We have been unable to locate records in which the total number of nuclear weapons which were onboard ships which deployed in the Falklands campaign is stated. At present, due to remote working practices which are in place because of the coronavirus pandemic, it is difficult to access all historical records, some of which may exist only in hard copy form. It is therefore possible that MOD holds information which could answer your question but cannot currently locate it. Equally, it is possible that MOD no longer holds information which could answer your question.

Under Section 16(1) of the Act you may find the document available at https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121109062639/http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4625B8A4-C533-4DAD-9FA5-0BFEE58F8D69/0/op_corporate1982_nuclear_weapons.pdf to be of some help. It contains a table detailing transfers of nuclear weapons and associated training and surveillance rounds between ships in the task force and between ships and onshore locations. The number 600 is used throughout the table to refer to the weapon, not the number of weapons present. Where T or S are appended, these refer to training and surveillance rounds, respectively. While the table explicitly states the numbers of training and surveillance rounds which were transferred from one location to another, it does not state how many nuclear rounds were, only the dates and locations of the transfers.

If you have queries regarding the content of this letter, please contact this office in the first instance.

If you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, or the content of this response, you can request an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, Ground Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.gov.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date of this response.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may raise your complaint directly to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not normally investigate your case until the

MOD internal review process has been completed. The Information Commissioner can be contacted: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website at <http://www.ico.org.uk/>.

Yours sincerely,

Defence Nuclear Organisation Secretariat