



Ministry
of Defence

JAMES HEAPPEY MP
MINISTER FOR THE ARMED FORCES

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
FLOOR 5, ZONE B, MAIN BUILDING
WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

Telephone 020 7218 9000 (Switchboard)

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Dear Julian,

Following your Written Parliamentary Question of the 18th May (45949) allow me to set out HMG's position more fully in this letter.

Safeguarding our national security will always be the first priority of the British Government. The UK Ministry of Defence has continued to engage with allies and key regional partners to understand the changes in global strategic risks as a result of COVID-19 to ensure that UK interests remain protected in all operating domains.

Regardless of Covid-19 the UK continues to meet all of our current operational commitments overseas. Those who might wish to do us harm have not been spared the effects of COVID 19, with some indicators showing an impact on those normally responsible for malign international activity. Despite this, the overall challenge has not reduced as a reduction in physical threat is offset by the increased espionage and economic threat. The UK continues to remain vigilant and we are confident in our measures to respond to the threat of hostile actors against the UK and our interests.

Defence has taken prudent steps to ensure the availability of Very High Readiness Forces throughout the current crisis, including continued support to NATO and International Partners, in order to fulfil the requirements of HMG. This whilst also providing c.20,000 personnel at readiness in support of the home and overseas response to COVID-19.

Defence does not comment in detail on matters relating to the nuclear deterrent, for the purposes of safeguarding national security, but let me reassure you that the Government is committed to maintaining a Continuous At Sea Deterrence posture for as long as the global security situation demands. We have taken appropriate measures to ensure all UK submarines continue to meet their operational tasking, deploying globally on operations and protecting our national interests. These include all submariners following Public Health England guidelines where practical, further emphasis on cleaning of communal areas, and measures prior to sailing which involve the whole ship's company quarantining onboard the submarine.

The Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

We closely monitor tensions across the globe on an ongoing basis. The UK continues to call on all countries to de-escalate and reduce tensions especially at this time.

HMG is monitoring and evaluating the disinformation picture. The Cross-government Counter Disinformation Cell has been stood up to monitor for mis- and disinformation related to Covid. The cell is currently dealing with around 70 incidents per week. Misinformation and disinformation can come from a range of sources, but we know that certain states routinely use disinformation as a foreign policy tool, and have seen evidence of this happening elsewhere.

The MOD is not only assessing and monitoring the threat but also developing proactive measures to rebut, contest and respond to Hostile State Activity against UK interests, both at home and abroad. We continue to work closely alongside Other Government Departments to achieve a cohesive approach.

Russia

As a major scientific centre, Russia is an important partner for efforts to encourage a coordinated international response to Covid-19, and to provide resilience to vulnerable countries.

Russia's assertive military posture towards the UK and our allies has continued during the pandemic. It has continued its exercise programme including sending ships and planes towards our borders and test fired missiles including one that is designed to destroy satellites.

Whilst Russian tabloid media have disseminated disinformation narratives, this is not assessed to be part of a concerted campaign orchestrated by the Russian authorities against the UK. Beyond disinformation however, Russia is conducting an ongoing influence campaign to further its foreign policy objectives against our interests and the Rules-Based International System. This includes exacerbating tensions between western allies and using medical diplomacy as a propaganda tool.

China

On Chinese activity, we continue working with our partners and allies to tackle some of the significant issues that the region faces including malign influence, transnational crime and the effects of climate change.

The UK is working with international partners, including through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism to protect our democracies against disinformation as we work together to tackle the shared threat of Covid-19. We condemn any intentionally false claims in relation to Covid-19. From the outset of the crisis we have underlined the importance of all countries providing timely, transparent and accurate data as an essential effective response.

Iran

Iran has been seriously affected by Covid-19, reporting high numbers of infections and deaths. As with all countries, we encourage Iranian authorities to be as transparent as possible about the scale of Covid's impact.

Although Iranian activities seem to have stabilised after the events of the beginning of January, regional tensions remain concerning. We remain deeply concerned by Iran's destabilising activity across the Middle East, including its political, financial and military support to a number of militant and proscribed groups. Such activity contributes to regional tensions and increases the risk of escalation into conflict.

We continue to monitor closely Iranian behaviour and call on all sides to de-escalate and reduce tensions.

North Korea

DPRK maintain that they still have not had any cases of COVID-19, a consistent message to both domestic and international audiences, and one which we cannot disprove. Their approach to tackling COVID-19 and recent behaviour suggests there have been no major outbreaks and that they are focused on preventing new cases from entering the country. Border restrictions and quarantine measures remain much stronger than in other countries, and we have had to temporarily close our Embassy in Pyongyang as a result.

DPRK's posture towards the international community has not become more aggressive as a result of COVID-19. Whilst there has been some activity in the region, it has not noticeably increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK aims to maintain a persistent military presence in the Indo Pacific, and we remain committed to helping enforce UNSCR sanctions.

I will place a copy of this letter in the Library of the House.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Heappey', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

JAMES HEAPPEY MP