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OD(80) 14th Meeting

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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
THURSDAY 15 MAY 1980 at 9.30 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Lord Hailsham
Lord Chancellor

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Lord Soames
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Sir Ian Gilmour MP
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt Hon John Nott MP
Secretary of State for Trade

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries
and Food
(Item 2)

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for the
Environment
(Item 2)

The Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Scotland
(Item 2)

The Rt Hon John Biffen MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury
(Item 2)

The Rt Hon Michael Jopling MP
Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr R M Hastie-Smith
Mr W N Wenban-Smith

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1. BASING OF UNITED STATES GROUND LAUNCHED CRUISE MISSILES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The Committee considered a Note by the Secretaries (OD(80) 42) summarising minutes from the Defence Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the political arguments for locating United States Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) in the United Kingdom in more than one base, and the financial implications of doing so.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that in terms of domestic politics he did not believe that it was possible to have only one American GLCM base in the United Kingdom, and that it would be preferable to have three. There was no question of a confrontation with the United States over the matter, nor was it an operational issue. He had put his views to Dr Harold Brown, the United States Secretary for Defence. It was the American preference to put all 160 GLCMs into Greenham Common where a lot of the necessary accommodation and storage facilities already existed. But Greenham Common already had a history of vociferous local protest, and the implementation of the American proposal would make it the largest GLCM base in Western Europe. Although his preference would be for three bases, he would be prepared to accept a division of the 160 GLCMs between Greenham Common and Molesworth. He considered that it would be right to press the Americans to meet the extra costs involved in deploying their GLCMs to two bases. He would not in any case be seeking any addition to the defence budget to meet these extra costs.

In discussion there was general agreement that the American GLCMs should be deployed in more than one base. The following points were made -

- a. the proximity of Greenham Common to the nuclear establishments at Aldermaston and Harwell were additional factors making it an unattractive location at which to base American GLCMs.
- b. Ideally the American GLCMs should be spread more widely over the country than Greenham Common in Berkshire, Molesworth in Cambridgeshire and the third suggested location at Wethersfield in Essex. It would be helpful if a suitable site could be found in the North although the absence of suitable nuclear storage and accommodation in such a location might make this a very expensive option.

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c. Although these GLCMs were American weapons they were being deployed in this country to defend it. The Americans, who were already bearing most of the cost of the GLCM programme, would be likely to point out this fact if they were pressed to meet additional costs for domestic political reasons.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee agreed that the American GLCMs in the United Kingdom should be based in two locations. The Committee would prefer Greenham Common to be avoided altogether, and would wish consideration to be given to locating one of the proposed bases further north than now proposed, in order to achieve the maximum geographical spread of this commitment. It was also the Committee's view that the United States Government could reasonably be asked to meet the additional costs inherent in these preferences. The Defence Secretary would need to consider the practical and financial implications of what was proposed, and in the light of that should undertake further discussions with the United States Government, reporting back to the Committee if he was not able to reach an acceptable agreement.

The Committee -

1. Invited the Defence Secretary -

a. to discuss with the United States Government the location of the United States Ground Launched Cruise Missiles at two locations in the United Kingdom, taking account of the views expressed by the Committee;

b. to seek a financial contribution from the United States Government for the additional costs of deploying United States Ground Launched Cruise Missiles in more than one location.

2. Agreed that no addition should be made to the defence budget to meet these extra costs.

2. CIVIL PREPAREDNESS FOR HOME DEFENCE

Previous Reference: OD(80) 9th Meeting, Item 3

The Committee considered a memorandum by the Home Secretary (OD(80) 40) to which was annexed a draft statement which he proposed to make to Parliament on the outcome of the Government's review of Home Defence.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that the Committee had agreed (OD(80) 9th Meeting, Item 3, Minute 1) that he should make an early public statement on the lines of the draft he had circulated. In the meantime there had been a sharp increase in political pressure on the Government to improve the country's preparedness for civil defence. There was a widely held opinion that the present level of home defence preparedness was wholly inadequate. This view was reflected in pressure from the Government's supporters and the press for a much larger military role in this field. A statement on the lines previously agreed by the Committee was thus unlikely to allay this criticism. He had considered whether it would be desirable to transfer responsibility for civil defence to the Ministry of Defence or alternatively to set up a new civil defence organisation. His own view was that neither course would be sensible: the local services directly concerned with the various aspects of civil defence, for example the police, fire and ambulance services, and the voluntary organisations, such as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS), had close links with the Home Office, and a new organisation could prove to be unduly expensive. It might however help to deflect criticism if he were able to say that a junior minister in the Ministry of Defence had been given specific responsibility for liaison with his own department on civil defence matters. He himself would participate in regional civil defence conferences designed to increase awareness of what was already being done and to promote further voluntary activity. It might be wise not to include in any statement any reference to the sums of money allocated for civil defence. These were very small, as a result of accepting as an overriding constraint the requirement to keep within his department's existing budget. This constraint was at the root of the awkward political situation in which the Government now found themselves on the civil defence question.

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In discussion the following points were made -

a. If the Government accepted - as some members of the Committee were disposed to accept - that the present state of preparedness in civil defence was wholly inadequate, its approach to the problem would have to be wholly different from that suggested by the draft statement circulated with the Home Secretary's memorandum, and it would have to be prepared to commit the necessary resources to improving that preparedness, giving that the necessary degree of priority in the allocation of public expenditure. In a matter of such vital national importance, financial constraints ought not to inhibit the taking of measures the situation required.

b. The current difficulties stemmed from the neglect of civil defence in the last fifteen years. As a result there was no clear basis for Government policy. An assessment was required of the risk of attack and of the conditions in which the civil defence services would have to operate. The state of the country's preparedness for civil defence had implications for the credibility of its military deterrent strategy. Civil defence should therefore be considered as an integral part of the national overall defence effort.

c. While the political pressure to improve the United Kingdom's civil defence arrangements might to some extent reflect wider frustrations, it also stemmed from a strong desire on the part of many individuals and voluntary organisations to participate in a civil defence effort. The WRVS and the Territorial Army could play a valuable role. The involvement of such organisations and of individuals could also make a contribution to public morale which was fundamental to the whole of the country's defence policy.

d. There was a danger, if the existing financial limits were ignored, of moving from the reality that not enough was being done to the illusion that everything was possible. It would be necessary to define the limits of what would be reasonable to reallocate to civil defence, and then to consider how provision could be made for that expenditure.

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e. There were substantial objections to a transfer of responsibility for civil defence to the Ministry of Defence. In addition to the points made by the Home Secretary there was a risk of diverting military commanders from their primary task of the military defence of the country; moreover civil defence depended essentially on local organisation and activity: central direction and command was even less likely to be available for this purpose in circumstances of nuclear than of conventional war. It might be worth examining the possibility that each department should prepare for the carrying out in war conditions of those activities for which it was responsible. The co-ordination of civil defence arrangements would also require further study.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee had insufficient information on which to base a civil defence policy. Further urgent work was required to assess the risks, and the arrangements required to meet them, taking account of the need to respond to the enthusiasm of voluntary organisations and of the overall constraints on public expenditure. The Home Secretary should take the lead in this work, in consultation with those of his colleagues most closely concerned. The Committee would wish to consider the issues again in the light of this further work. Meanwhile it would be preferable to delay making a statement to Parliament.

The Committee -

1. Invited the Secretary of the Cabinet to make arrangements for a Ministerial Sub-Committee, under the chairmanship of the Home Secretary, to examine urgently and report upon the requirements for civil defence and the most suitable arrangements for meeting them.

2. Agreed that in the meantime no further statement should be made to Parliament on the subject.

Cabinet Office
16 May 1980

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