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CABINETMOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD  
TO

CC(82) 8th Conclusions

Thursday 4 March 1982THE UNITED  
KINGDOM  
STRATEGIC  
NUCLEAR  
DETERRENTPrevious  
Reference:  
CC(82) 2nd  
Conclusions

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that the strategic nuclear deterrent was central to the defence of the United Kingdom. No one could foresee what might over the next 30-40 years happen to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation or to the United States attitude to the defence of Europe. A strategic deterrent under British national control was therefore essential. The Polaris force would be 30 years old by the 1990s and its credibility would be declining. Only a four-boat Trident force could provide a successor which would be credible in Soviet eyes and remain operational well into the 21st Century. The D5 Trident 2 missile would be more cost-effective than the C4 Trident 1 version, because it would preserve commonality between Britain and America. It would also be cheaper during the years immediately ahead. Its total cost over fifteen years would average £500 million a year or just over three per cent of an annual Defence Budget of over £14,000 million. By contrast France's nuclear deterrent was costing twenty per cent of her defence expenditure. For both military and political reasons the British decision could not be further delayed. Following the Cabinet's discussion on 21 January, therefore, secret high-level negotiations had been undertaken with the United States authorities to establish the terms on which the Trident 2 missile could be made available. The upshot of these negotiations had been exceptionally favourable; after a difficult start the Americans had in the end made every effort to be helpful. As in the case of the Polaris and Trident 1 agreements, the missiles would be made available at the contract price applicable to the United States Navy. By way of offset the United States authorities had undertaken to modify administratively the effect of their Buy America legislation, so that British industry could compete for sub-contracts across the whole range of the United States Trident programme. American liaison staff in London would be available to advise British firms wishing to tender for such business. Their success would of course depend on their competitiveness. The Americans had also indicated privately that they hoped to continue their current policy of placing other large defence orders in Britain. The surcharges applicable to a British purchase of Trident 2 would be £35 million lower than those envisaged under the Trident 1 agreement;

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the facilities charge had been waived altogether and the Research and Development levy would be limited to a fixed sum in constant dollars rather than a percentage, so that no cost escalation risk would be involved in either case. In return for these concessions the Americans had sought assurances about British conventional deployments; and while no specific undertakings of this kind would feature in the proposed agreement, the British negotiators had been able to make good use of his decision (which he had already taken on other grounds) to retain the Royal Navy's two assault ships Fearless and Intrepid. As the result of an unexplained leak some account of these terms had appeared in the British Press. Public reactions had been favourable. Subject to the Cabinet's agreement he now hoped that the negotiations could be concluded and the new agreement announced on 11 March. Thereafter every effort would need to be made to maximise public support for the decision. Although a majority of the electorate clearly believed that Britain should retain an independent deterrent, there was as yet less agreement that Trident 2 would be the right choice. It would be important to show that its real cost over time would be no higher than Trident 1's would have been; that it would leave room within the defence programme for significant increased expenditure on conventional forces; and that there would be no need for Britain to deploy the maximum number of missiles or warheads possible with the Trident 2 system, if a more limited number proved militarily adequate.

In discussion there was general support for the Secretary of State for Defence's proposals and appreciation was expressed for the full briefing which he had arranged for members of the Cabinet following their earlier discussion of the subject on 21 January. The decision would be warmly welcomed by almost all the Government's supporters in Parliament, as a meeting the previous evening had made clear. Cost escalation remained a danger; but the proposed offset arrangements should prove particularly valuable, provided that they did not encounter too much opposition in the United States Congress. A major effort would now be necessary to rally public support for the Trident 2 programme. It would not be possible to devise penalty arrangements which would preclude a future Government from abandoning it. But politically it might not prove disadvantageous that comparatively little would have been spent on the programme by the time of the next General Election; the Government could not be accused of pre-empting the issue, and in practice many of their opponents in Parliament would if they came to office be forced to recognise that the decision now being taken was the only possible one. Public emphasis would need to be placed on the annual rather than the fifteen-year cost of the programme; on the inaccuracy of fears that it would seriously undermine Britain's conventional military strength, which could in fact be effectively deployed only in conjunction with an adequate strategic deterrent; and on the continuing search for nuclear disarmament, which would be harder rather than easier if Britain abandoned her position of strength.

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The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) gained from being at least nominally a non-party organisation, and from the support it enjoyed among the young and in some church circles. It was perhaps a pity that the CND's many opponents were not also organised on a non-party basis. The CND rightly stressed the terrible nature of nuclear weapons but failed to recognise that Britain's possession of a strategic deterrent lessened rather than increased the danger of nuclear war. Although there were arguments against suggesting that Britain might deploy fewer missiles and warheads than the Trident 2 system made possible, there would on balance be major advantage in making clear to those with a serious concern for arms control that no military escalation would in practice be involved in the switch by Britain from Trident 1. Local opinion in Scotland should also be reassured by the fact that Trident 2 would not involve an extension of the area of the base facilities in the Firth of Clyde. Internationally it would have been unthinkable to leave France as the only effective nuclear power in Western Europe. Britain's allies were not expected to oppose her Trident 2 decision. Nuclear weapons were at present a very emotional issue in the Federal Republic of Germany, particularly within Chancellor Schmidt's party; but the private views of even such left-wing figures as Herr Bahr were that the British and French deterrents were vital for the security of Europe. The French Government, in order to meet domestic criticism of the much higher cost of their own deterrent, felt obliged to argue that British nuclear forces were not fully independent of the Americans. In operational terms, of course, this was quite untrue. Logistically, the British Trident 2 force as at present conceived did involve a degree of dependence on American support, though less than would have been the case with Trident 1 missiles which had a much shorter in-tube life. If such support were ever cut off, the success of the Chevaline programme suggested that Britain would not be technologically unable to replace it on a national basis.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Cabinet agreed that Trident 2 missiles for a four-boat British force should be acquired from the United States on the terms suggested. Unless an earlier announcement became necessary because of leaks from Washington, the Cabinet would have an opportunity of formally reconfirming this decision on 11 March, prior to the agreement being announced later that day. The Secretary of State for Defence would be publishing an Open Government Document explaining the reasons for the new policy. This might be circulated to the Cabinet for their information on 11 March. Meanwhile it was of the utmost importance that the strictest secrecy should be maintained about the Cabinet's current discussion, the minutes of which should be retained by the Secretary of the Cabinet.

The Cabinet -

Took note with approval of the Prime Minister's  
summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office

15 March 1982

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