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See Mo.DBA note
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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

10 July 1980

**PRIME MINISTER'S
PERSONAL MESSAGE
SERIAL No. T139/80**

Dear Mr. President,

As you know, we have been giving much thought in recent months to the question of a successor to our present Polaris force. I wanted personally to let you know that, after intensive deliberations, the Government has concluded that the best course is to replace Polaris in the early 1990s with the US Trident weapons system. I have therefore formally asked President Carter whether the United States Government would be prepared to supply Trident I missiles and equipment (including the MIRV capability) and supporting services on broadly the same basis as Polaris was supplied.

The size of the new force will be not less than four submarines. The option of a fifth boat will remain open for the time being, since it is not necessary to decide this yet. The submarines themselves, and the nuclear warheads, will be designed and manufactured in the United Kingdom.

Like Polaris, the successor force will be assigned to NATO. It will nevertheless, as now, be wholly owned by us and under our sole operational control.

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I am convinced that this decision is not only in the best interests of the United Kingdom but in those of the Alliance as a whole, to whose security the United Kingdom's continuing possession of a strategic deterrent capability will remain a major contribution. The Trident force will, I believe, place us in the best possible position to operate effectively well into the 21st century in whatever strategic environment we then face.

I should like to emphasise that we remain committed to the strengthening of our conventional forces, including the 3% real annual increase in our defence spending and support of the force improvements programmes already discussed in the Alliance.

I hope that the Government will be able to announce a favourable response from President Carter to this request in the House of Commons in the afternoon of Thursday, 17 July. I attach particular importance to letting you know of our decision in advance of my announcement, but I would be grateful if, till then, you will regard this information as confidential to yourself.

I enclose a copy of a note which we shall be giving our other Allies just before the announcement.

I am sending a similar message today to Chancellor Schmidt.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Thatcher

His Excellency Monsieur Valery Giscard d'Estaing

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SUCCESSOR TO THE UNITED KINGDOM POLARIS SYSTEM

Timing of Polaris Replacement

1. The United Kingdom Polaris strategic deterrent force came into operation in the late 1960s. A major improvement programme to maintain its effectiveness during the 1980s is now nearing completion. After that period, however, it will become increasingly difficult and expensive to maintain the operational capability of the force. Decisions therefore need to be taken now about a successor system to begin entering service in the early 1990s.

The Case for Trident

2. A wide range of possible options for a successor system has been examined in detail. Account has been taken of the need for a successor force to remain effective well into the 21st century, the timescale for acquisition, and the probable cost. Her Majesty's Government has decided that the operational requirement would best be met by purchase of the Trident I MIRV missile system from the United States, to be equipped with warheads developed and produced in the United Kingdom and carried aboard British-built nuclear submarines.

3. The choice of Trident reflects the need to deploy a force able to provide a degree of insurance against Soviet strategic defences in the longer term. The long range of Trident I and its MIRV capability will provide such an insurance against further advance in Soviet anti-submarine and anti-missile capabilities. Trident is thus related to the situation in the 1990s and beyond, just as Polaris (and the Chevaline programme to improve Polaris) were intended to cope with the existing and foreseen strategic environments of the 1970s and the 1980s.

/Anglo-US Cooperation

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Anglo-US Cooperation

4. The United States Government's agreement to this request for cooperation in the modernisation of the United Kingdom force will continue the long-standing US/UK strategic cooperation which dates back to World War II and has traditionally involved the sharing of highly advanced strategic technology.

Contribution to NATO

5. The new Trident force will be assigned to NATO and dedicated to SACEUR targets, just as the Polaris force is now. Her Majesty's Government regards the maintenance of a viable and credible independent strategic deterrent as a vital element of its contribution to the Alliance. The decision to replace the Polaris force represents a reaffirmation of the strength of the United Kingdom commitment to the Alliance and thus to the defence of Western Europe.

6. The United Kingdom will, as with Polaris, have full operational control over the new force. This independent centre of decision-making increases the Alliance's general deterrent capability, thus strengthening strategic stability and collective security.

Size of the Force

7. The United Kingdom Trident force is initially planned as four submarines each carrying sixteen missiles, as with the present Polaris force. A fifth submarine would provide additional insurance against improved Soviet defensive capabilities and against accident or major equipment failure, but would add to the cost. A decision on a fifth submarine is not needed until 1982/83 and this option will therefore be kept under review until then.

SALT II

8. The United States made clear that the SALT II Agreements do not preclude cooperation with its allies, including cooperation on modernisation. Indeed, the United States has made clear that transfer of numerically limited systems is not necessarily precluded. The Soviets certainly understood this US position to apply with special strength to US/UK cooperation, given the intensive and long-standing pattern of cooperation between the United States and the United Kingdom.

SALT III

9. The Soviet Union will doubtless continue to demand the inclusion of non-United States strategic systems. Similar Soviet efforts in SALT I and II were successfully resisted by the United States. The proposed new force does not provide any new justification for such a demand. The United Kingdom will only be keeping pace with the technological improvement and expansion of Soviet systems.

10. By the mid-1990s, the United Kingdom Trident force will represent roughly the same proportion of Soviet strategic forces (assuming these are limited to SALT II levels) as the Polaris force did of the equivalent Soviet forces when it became fully operational in 1970. Indeed in absolute terms the gap between Soviet and United Kingdom warhead numbers will be very much greater in the 1990s than in 1970.

Theatre Nuclear Force Modernisation

11. Britain's strategic SLBM force lies clearly outside the category of those United States and Soviet long-range land-based theatre nuclear forces about whose limitation the United States has repeatedly invited the Soviet Union to negotiate.

12. The replacement of the UK Polaris force in the 1990s is quite separate from, though eventually complementary to, the planned programme to modernise in the 1980s the Alliance's land-based long-range theatre nuclear forces. The two forces are not interchangeable in military or deterrent terms. The GLCM/Pershing II force answers a somewhat different requirement: the NATO nuclear planning group identified a major gap in the selective employment capability of the Alliance against long-range theatre targets, and recommended that this should be met by the deployment of long-range land-based theatre missiles. The modernised UK force will be sea-based and thus cannot meet this need. It will contribute to NATO's deterrent capabilities at the central strategic level, but it is not well suited for selective employment at a lower stage of conflict. In addition, the technical characteristics of the new long-range theatre nuclear force system will differ significantly from those of the modernised UK force and can be expected to be targetted differently by SACEUR.

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Conventional Forces

13. Her Majesty's Government remain determined to maintain and strengthen the United Kingdom's conventional defence effort in accordance with undertakings already given in the Alliance. The economies made possible by cooperation with the United States, compared with the financial burden which would be associated with an independent modernisation programme, will make an important contribution to this process.

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