

Ref. A09119

PRIME MINISTER

The United Kingdom Strategic Deterrent: Missile Processing

MISC 7(82) 4

BACKGROUND

The Secretary of State for Defence's earlier paper on the choice of the Trident II system (MISC 7(81) 1) mentioned as a possible area for cost saving the idea of processing and storing the Trident missiles in the United States instead of expanding the existing Polaris facility at Coulport on Loch Long in Scotland. It was agreed that this should be studied with the Americans, without commitment.

2. His present paper (MISC 7(82) 4) recommends that a decision in principle to use United States facilities should now be taken, formal negotiations with the Americans begun, and an early announcement of our intentions made. He believes that this will secure savings in capital expenditure of some £500 million over the next 8 years.

3. The Polaris missiles were assembled from United States components at Coulport where the United Kingdom warheads were added. Between submarine patrols, some of the missiles are taken out of the boats, taken to pieces and tested. Faulty or worn-out parts are normally sent back to the United States for repair.

4. The proposed arrangements for Trident are that the missiles would be assembled in the United States and placed in the boats there; at the end of a submarine commission, the boat would return to the United States where the missiles would be removed. During a commission, certain components could be exchanged in the submarine without removing the missile. The warheads would be inserted and removed, as now, at the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane.

5. The Secretary of State for Scotland and the Chief of the Defence Staff have been invited to the meeting. Rear Admiral John Grove, who is in charge of the Trident project in the Ministry of Defence, will be available if needed to give expert advice.

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HANDLING

6. The issues which Ministers will wish to address are: cost, independence, arms control and local political/industrial factors in Scotland.

(a) Cost

The capital saving is estimated at £500 million, far more than the initial guess of £150-£300 million. The Secretary of State for Defence might be asked how the savings arise and whether it follows that the total cost of the Trident programme could be quoted publicly as falling from £7½ billion to £7 billion.

(b) Independence

The issue here is whether using American facilities will reduce the independence of the British deterrent in fact, or whether it will be perceived as doing so. Dependence on the United States for the refurbishment and logistic support of components of the weapon system and missiles will be the same whether the processing takes place in Scotland or in America. But if American support were cut off, we should always have at least two boatloads of missiles which could be used until they required servicing. The reverse of that coin is that we would never have under our own control a missile load for the fourth boat (the one in refit), nor for part of the time should we have missiles available for the third boat. Will two boatloads of missiles be enough into the next century in the face of probable improvements in Soviet defences?

The Ministry of Defence have been considering creating a capacity to remove and store our own missiles, perhaps by converting a merchant ship for use in an emergency, eg if a submarine is damaged. Is this their intention? Is it intended that there should be a common stock of missiles held for both United States and United Kingdom submarines in the United States, or will we have missiles that are at all times United Kingdom property? What safeguards would there be that

United Kingdom missiles will be processed when we want them and not left until convenient to the Americans? The Secretary of State for Defence and his advisers might be asked to answer these questions.

(c) Arms Control

There are two issues:

i. Whether a decision to process and store United Kingdom missiles in the United States will affect the Americans' ability to keep United Kingdom Trident out of the START talks.

ii. Whether future developments in bilateral arms control arrangements which the United States might make with the USSR would impede United Kingdom use of United States facilities for operational purposes (which processing and storage might be held to be) while permitting the United States to continue to supply spare parts for the missiles.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary should be invited to comment.

(d) Scotland

The £500 million capital saving would result from not doing construction work in Scotland (Scottish jobs) and not buying the necessary processing equipment from the United States (no job opportunities lost in the United Kingdom except in so far as British firms would have bid successfully for the contracts under the Trident offset agreement). There would be substantial (up to 2,000) job losses at Coulport eventually, but not until Polaris is phased out in about 15 years' time. The effect on local planning processes is unclear: the present base at Coulport would not have to be expanded, but it seems that the safety distances within which planning controls have to be applied will still be larger than Polaris requires. Is there any difference in timing? The expansion of the base is on the critical path of the Trident programme. If we go for United States processing, does this mean that we shall not have to start the planning process as early as we would if we were to expand Coulport? A decision to go for United States processing could not be reversed without delaying the whole programme. If at some future date there were signs

of a future United States Administration wanting to stop supporting the United Kingdom national deterrent, we would have forfeited the system of building a United Kingdom facility. The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Scotland should be asked to comment.

CONCLUSION

7. Subject to the discussion, the Group should be guided, on balance, to agree to the Secretary of State for Defence's proposals on the grounds that they will be helpful towards countering the criticism of Trident's high cost and its effects on the rest of the defence programme; and that their effect on our independence is marginal either way: we should still have a degree of independence at least as high as we have with Polaris.

RTA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

27 July 1982

Wentheads

I think that there are really two basic
questions:

(1) If we do as the Secretary of State suggests, we shall not in reality be less independent than now; but shall we seem or be thought to be so?

(2) Are we prepared to risk being dependent on the US to the extent involved for forty years, well into the 21st century? The answer to that is less clear today than it would have been 20 years ago.