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PRIME MINISTER

Future of the Strategic Deterrent

At the Ministerial Group on Nuclear Defence Policy on 19th September (MISC 7(79) 3rd Meeting, Item 2) it was decided on the basis of the interim report covered by Sir John Hunt's minute to you of 14th September that a full report should be submitted on the options identified for the replacement of Polaris. That report is now attached. It has been prepared by a working group under the chairmanship of Professor Mason, Chief Scientific Adviser, Ministry of Defence, and has been agreed at official level as to facts and figures by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Treasury.

2. You will recall that the Group's meeting on 24th May (MISC 7(79) 1st Meeting Item 1) had before it a 3-part study by officials entitled "Factors Relating to the Further Consideration of the Future of the United Kingdom Deterrent". Part I of that study dealt with the politico-military requirement. Part II dealt with the criteria for deterrence and remains relevant to your present decision. Part III dealt with system options. The report now attached is a revised version of that, which takes account of the extensive information made available to us by the Americans in the interim.

3. As agreed at MISC 7 on 19th September, the theoretical option of air-launched cruise missiles (ALCM) has been dropped. The report therefore concentrates on the three other options, viz.

- (a) Ballistic missiles (BM):
 - (i) An upgraded Polaris system (A4)
 - (ii) The Trident I system (C4)
- (b) Sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM)

Other theoretical options are mentioned but only for purposes of comparison; they are not put forward for serious consideration. An important sub-option is however identified in the case of the C4 missile, which subject to United States agreement could be obtained either with or without its important MIRV (multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicle) capability. The other BM option, A4,



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would like Polaris have only an MRV (multiple re-entry vehicle) capability, which we would have to develop ourselves. The MIRV/MRV distinction does not of course apply to cruise missiles, which have only one warhead each and rely for penetration on their low trajectory and on the greater numbers in which they would typically be fired.

4. In considering this report I believe that the Ministerial Group will wish to concentrate on three key questions. These are:-

- (a) Should there be a British strategic nuclear deterrent in succession to Polaris? *We have decided there should*
- (b) If so, what assured level of damage will it need to be capable of achieving in order to fulfil its deterrent purpose?
- (c) Which weapon system should we choose?

5. The Secretary of State for Defence will be putting specific proposals to the Ministerial Group.

6. I am copying this minute and its attachment to the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Defence.

Robert Armstrong

(Robert Armstrong)

29th October, 1979



The National Archives

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PRIME MINISTER

THE SUCCESSOR TO POLARIS

In his minute to you of 29th October, the Secretary of the Cabinet set out the three key questions for consideration by the Ministerial Group on Nuclear Defence Policy on 5th November. I invite agreement that the answers should be as follows.

2. First, we should, as we envisaged when we last discussed this, retain an independent British strategic deterrent. This is a vital safeguard of our national interests and a contribution to NATO which only we of the European members provide. No alternative application of the resources available would offer a comparable contribution to our security and that of our Allies.

3.

*Paragraph deleted and retained under
Section 3(4).*

*CAWayland
13/12/11*

4. Thirdly, I consider that the US Trident 1 (C4) missile, with its multiple independently-targettable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capability would best answer the operational requirement. Cruise missiles, because of their vulnerability to air defences are unattractive on

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operational and cost grounds, and the other options considered in the officials' report are too marginal in capability for a force which must last us well into the next century. C4 is also cheaper than the alternatives, largely because we would be buying a complete US system (apart from warheads) off the shelf, thus avoiding the need for development, and subsequent logistic support, of a re-entry system unique to the United Kingdom, with all the problems to which that could give rise. The costs and timescale are also much more reliable.

5. I recommend that we should plan to have five SSBNs each with 16 missiles, the fifth boat giving a major enhancement at a proportionately modest extra cost. A five-boat capability with two always at sea, would be much less at risk to Soviet ~~*~~ ~~~~~ ~~*~~ ASW advances, and less likely to need expensive mid-life improvement.

6. The capital cost would be of the order of £4,500m over 15 years - an average of perhaps 2½% of the Defence Budget, with about 5% at the peak spend. These costs are bound to affect the timing, and perhaps also the scale, of our conventional and theatre nuclear programmes, but I believe that we must accept such consequences.

7. To procure and operate the force will cause resource problems in the shipbuilding industry, where construction of hunter-killer submarines would be affected; in the supply of special nuclear materials; in the Royal Navy and the dockyards; at the Coulport armament depot, where difficult new construction could be needed; and, most markedly, in our nuclear establishments where there are already very severe shortages of skilled manpower. The problems at Aldermaston are such that we cannot in any event plan to carry out more than one new nuclear project at a time. Decisions on new theatre weapons must wait if we are to give priority, as we must, to a warhead for the new strategic force. I shall need to introduce

/ exceptional ...

~ Words deleted and retained under Section 3(4). TOP SECRET

AWayland
13/12/11



exceptional measures, including perhaps on pay and conditions, to get and keep skilled manpower.

8. In summary I propose that we should approach the United States with a view to procuring a five-boat force of Trident (C4) missiles, with MIRV, for introduction into service in the early 1990s.

9. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "J.P." with a horizontal line underneath.

1st November 1979