

Ref: B05909

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONGPolaris Replacement

Dr Aaron and I were able to have a long talk à 2 on the evening of 8th February, in the secure-speech room of the British Embassy in Paris, which is believed to be proof against even the most sophisticated eaves-dropping.

2. He said that he had discussed "our problem" with the President, Mr Vance, Dr Brown and Dr Brzezinski, in the light of your 15th January meeting with the last-named and in preparation for his own talk with me. The President's commitment to us remained total. They all accepted that as things had worked out there could no longer be any link between the timing of our request and SALT II ratification, which (as we knew) was what they would have preferred. But they did not think the present moment was the right one, with the Afghanistan crisis in its present stage. The Administration were already being accused, domestically and internationally, of over-reacting to the crisis. If they now announced a decision to help us over Polaris replacement, that would be seen as a further and extreme example of over-reaction. It might also be divisive of the Alliance, which was quite badly enough divided as it was (Dr Aaron had just come from having his head washed at the Elysee over the United States leak about the proposed meeting of the 5 Foreign Ministers in Bonn which the French had in consequence refused to attend).

3. I said that we had also considered the problem carefully, in the post-Afghanistan context, and had reached an opposite conclusion. The present juncture seemed almost ideal for an announcement of what many would see as a welcome sign of resolution; and it would be harder than it might otherwise have been for our critics within or our enemies without to attack the decision convincingly. The Administration were no doubt the best judges of their own public opinion. But we had heard nothing to suggest that the Alliance would be divided on the issue. The French in particular were taking a robust tone, at least in private, as he and I had heard earlier that day; and since they would so clearly not be associated with the decision they would not feel doctrinally obliged to attack it, in the way they were currently attacking the idea of a Foreign Ministers' meeting à 5.

The French have accepted for some time now that we are going to replace Polaris with US help.

4. I then took Dr Aaron carefully through our own reasons for disliking further delay. We had been lucky to have been able to damp down public speculation in Britain, and it had been skilful of Mr Pym to divert immediate public attention onto Chevaline at the recent debate in Parliament. But a climate of expectation was inevitably building up, as the debate had showed; and it was getting harder and harder for our Ministers to claim that, after nearly a year in office, they were still unable to make up their minds what they wanted. Delay also increased the danger of inaccurate but damaging rumours that we were getting cold feet about staying nuclear or that the Americans were getting cold feet about helping us. We needed in any case to get ahead with the matter, not only for technical and lead-time reasons but also because we had now reached the point where the lack of a decision was casting "planning blight" over all our forward thinking about defence plans and budgets, and was making it almost impossible to explain the situation convincingly to the Chiefs of Staff and others who had legitimate questions but could not be told the true facts.

4. For these reasons, I explained, we felt strongly that the two Governments should now be actively seeking to identify the "window" to which Dr Brzezinski had referred in talking to you. Dr Aaron asked if we had reached a point where a fixed date (for our request to be put in) was more important than an early one. I said that, in the sense in which I thought he intended the question, our answer could only be yes. An early date was very important too. But a fixed date would be an enormous help, even if it had to be more than a week or so ahead. In any case there was presumably no question of a trade-off between the two. The date would not be later for being fixed now; and since all we would be fixing would in effect be a deadline there would presumably be no difficulty in advancing it if developments made that feasible from the American point of view. He agreed, and after making careful notes on our arguments promised to do his best to get the President to agree to a fixed date (in this sense) as soon as possible.

5. With suitable apologies for trespassing on American domestic matters, I then asked about the influence on timing of the Presidential Election. Did there not come a moment later this year when it would be too near the Election for the President to propose, or Congress to approve, such a far-reaching step?

To my surprise he said no. In all the White House's many discussions of the President's strategy and tactics for securing renomination and re-election, this issue had never been mentioned. The Republicans would certainly not be able to criticise the President for a step they would themselves favour. Senator Kennedy might; but they were not too worried about him any more. When I pressed the point that Congress would surely beyond a certain date feel that the decisions should be taken or ratified by the next President and next Congress, Dr Aaron said he thought not. Under the procedural rules Congress could not prevaricate. The proposal would be automatically ratified unless Congress within 50 days specifically threw it out; and it was inconceivable that they would be willing to do that. But he promised to double-check the point, which he said had not been previously thought about, and let me know whether all the experts agreed with what he had said.

*Before the
Main primary.*

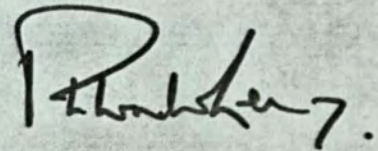
6. Going back to his starting point, Dr Aaron said that in order to damp down charges of over-reaction to Afghanistan the President would want to make clear in public that his agreement to our request stood on its own and was in no way a consequence of the crisis. He hoped that the Prime Minister would take the same public line about the request itself. I said I did not foresee difficulty over this. The Washington communique of 17th/18th December made clear that both sides had made a decision in principle on the matter before the crisis broke (if only by a whisker). But I thought the Prime Minister might well wish to say in public that Afghanistan helped to show how right this decision had been. If so, I assumed that would cause no embarrassment in Washington. Dr Aaron did not demur.

*The outside
world doesn't
know that.*

7. Dr Aaron then proposed, and I accepted, the following campaign plan:
- a. He would send me an early message confirming the point about Congress.
 - b. He would report our position to the President and seek his agreement to the idea of fixing a date or deadline as soon as possible.
 - c. He would then ask me to make a quick visit to Washington, to consider the outcome of b. and hopefully tie up all the details.

He implied, without actually saying so, that my visit would take place before the end of February; and that I should come without acolytes.

8. I undertook to report accordingly to the Prime Minister and yourself.



11th February 1980

R L WADE-GERY



TOP SECRET

Prime Minister 18
HLL
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PRIME MINISTER

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Polaris Replacement

I submit for your information the attached note reporting our latest contact with the White House. As you know, we are keeping all written material on this subject in the Cabinet Office and No. 10. But I am arranging for Mr. Pym and Lord Carrington to be informed orally.

RA

(Robert Armstrong)

11th February, 1980

SECRET

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Deference

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

POLARIS REPLACEMENT

The Prime Minister has seen your minute AO1384 of 11 February 1980. She was grateful for this report of Mr. Wade-Gery's meeting with Dr. Aaron.

: C A. WHITMORE

KRB

14 February 1980

SECRET