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ITEM: NATO SUPPORTS SDII RESEARCH  
BY CHARLES E. SKINNER, LPS DEFENCE CORRESPONDENT

LUXEMBOURG (LPS): PRESIDENT REAGAN'S STRATEGIC DEFENCE INITIATIVE (SDII) WAS THE MAIN FOCUS OF DISCUSSION AT THE START OF NATO'S NUCLEAR PLANNING GROUP (NPG) MEETING HERE TODAY, 26 MARCH.

AS HIS TRADITIONAL AT THESE TWICE-YEARLY GATHERINGS OF ALLIANCE DEFENCE MINISTERS (14 NATO NATIONS, INCLUDING THE UNITED KINGDOM, CONTRIBUTE TO THE NPG), US DEFENCE SECRETARY CASPAR WEINBERGER STARTED BY GIVING A BRIEFING ON NUCLEAR FORCES, WITH THE EMPHASIS ON STRATEGIC STOCKS.

ACCORDING TO A BRITISH OFFICIAL, THE NEWS WAS ALL ABOUT SDII. MR WEINBERGER, IT IS UNDERSTOOD, ANNOUNCED THAT HE WILL BE FORMALISING HIS INVITATION FOR ALLIANCE GOVERNMENTS AND INDUSTRIES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME. INDEED, AN INVITATION IS EXPECTED TO BE ISSUED TODAY AND MR WEINBERGER WILL BE LOOKING FOR A FORMAL RESPONSE FROM AMERICA'S ALLIES, BUT NOT AT THIS MEETING.

AS A BRITISH OFFICIAL OBSERVED: 'THE RESEARCH PHASE IS LIKELY TO BE LONG, SO WE ARE NOT UNDER IMMEDIATE PRESSURE FOR AGREEMENTS. HE STRESSED THAT THERE HAD BEEN UNANIMOUS SUPPORT FOR THE UNITED STATES' COMMITMENT TO RESEARCH.'

MR WEINBERGER REPORTEDLY DESCRIBED THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME ITSELF AS 'AGGRESSIVE.' A BRITISH OFFICIAL SAID THIS WAS IN THE SENSE THAT WASHINGTON WANTED TO DISCOVER JUST WHAT COULD BE DONE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNDER THE SDII PROGRAMME. THE US WANTED TO IDENTIFY WHAT THE NATO ALLIES COULD DO - HOW THEY COULD PARTICIPATE IN THE SCHEME.

BESIDES WANTING TO INVOLVE ALLIANCE COUNTRIES, THE STATES WOULD LIKE TO INVITE SOME NON-MEMBERS TO PLAY A PART AND, QUESTIONED ON THIS, A BRITISH OFFICIAL SAID HE ASSUMED THAT JAPAN WOULD BE INVITED TO CONTRIBUTE. ON THE OVERALL QUESTION OF INVOLVING NON-ALLIANCE COUNTRIES IN RESEARCH, HE SAID THIS HAD BEEN GENERALLY WELCOMED AROUND THE TABLE

BRITAIN'S POSITION OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH INTO SDII IS WELL KNOWN, WITH PRIME MINISTER MARGARET THATCHER HAVING PUBLICLY SUPPORTED IT. THE GENERAL FEELING OF THIS MORNING'S MEETING WAS THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE AT THIS EARLY STAGE TO JUDGE SDII DEPLOYMENT.

SOURCES MADE THE POINT THAT THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO INTENTION OF UNDERMINING OTHER NATO STRATEGIES AS A RESULT OF SDII RESEARCH. A BRITISH OFFICIAL SAID THAT THE NPG HAD BEEN ABLE TO GET MORE CLOSELY TO GRIPS WITH THE REAL ISSUES: 'TO AGREE RESEARCH, TO MAINTAIN ALLIANCE SOLIDARITY - BUT NATO STRATEGY THE REST IS IN THE FUTURE.' ANOTHER BRITISH SOURCE ALSO UNDERLINED THAT ALLIANCE STRATEGY NOW IS RIGHT, 'AND THE NPG HAS PUT THIS IN PERSPECTIVE. WHAT WE HAVE TO DO NOW IS LOOK TO THE FUTURE.'

NATO SECRETARY-GENERAL LORD CARRINGTON TOLD PRESSMEN THAT THE MEETING HAD BEEN HARMONIOUS AND FRUITFUL. AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE ALLIES, INCLUDING BRITAIN, ON THE VALIDITY OF SDII RESEARCH, IS AN IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT. AS A BRITISH OFFICIAL OBSERVED, IT WOULD BE TOTALLY COUNTER PRODUCTIVE IF THERE WERE DISAGREEMENT ON THE PROGRAMME AS EARLY AS THE RESEARCH STAGE.

NPG MINISTERS MEET AGAIN THIS AFTERNOON AND AGAIN TOMORROW MORNING. (LPS)

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