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24th November 1986

*CDP*  
*26/11*

*Dear Clerk,*

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ELIMINATION OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

During her meeting in Washington on 14th November with Mr Weinberger, the Prime Minister suggested that the British Chiefs of Staff should make available to their United States opposite numbers the results of their studies into the implications of the elimination of ballistic missiles. The Chief of the Defence Staff has now written to Admiral Crowe enclosing a short paper. I attach a copy of the paper and of CDS's covering letter.

I am sending copies of this letter to Colin Budd (Foreign and Commonwealth office) and Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

*Yours sincerely*

(I C F ANDREWS)

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**PERSONAL**Admiral J W Crowe Jr  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff  
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21 November 1986

*Dear Bill,*

During the Prime Minister's visit to Washington at the end of last week, in conversation with Mr Weinberger, she offered to make available, by way of a contribution to the study being undertaken by the Joint Chiefs, the results of our own work on the deterrence implications of eliminating ballistic missiles. These I now attach at Annex to this letter.

I should emphasise that we have so far been able to conduct only a preliminary assessment. We have not addressed the negotiability of the new strategic regime or the formidable verification problems which would be associated with a treaty banning ballistic missiles. Nor have we looked at the potentially serious implications in these circumstances of possible arms control constraints on air breathing systems.

We are therefore currently considering how we should further develop and refine our analysis and our policy on arms control for the future. It might perhaps be useful for our staffs to get together to compare notes.

*Conroy,*  
*John*



THE ELIMINATION OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

Preliminary assessments have been made by the UK Defence Staff of the effect both in global terms and on the UK's strategic deterrent modernisation plans of eliminating all ballistic missiles within 10 years. The main conclusions reached are as follows:

General Considerations

- a. The elimination of ballistic missiles would be felt differently at the strategic and theatre levels. At the strategic level the US would be left with a clear qualitative and quantitative advantage in offensive systems but would be critically deficient in air defence. At the theatre level Europe would be left at a marked disadvantage in both offensive and defensive systems. Correcting these imbalances would require huge investment.
- b. Compared with NATO's current mix of nuclear systems, a force of air breathers alone would be less survivable, flexible and effective. For a similar deterrent capability these drawbacks would have to be compensated for by far larger numbers of weapons and/or improved defence, again at very great expense.
- c. From a US point of view air breathing deterrence on these terms might be acceptable - attractive even given the removal of the large Soviet advantage in heavy MIRV'd ICBMs and with them the main threat of a sudden pre-emptive first strike.
- d. From the European point of view, air breathing deterrence poses serious difficulties. The provision of a secure non-ballistic retaliatory capability in the European theatre able to hold Soviet targets at risk would be difficult and expensive. The extent to which it cannot be provided weakens the escalation link between Europe and America.
- e. To the extent that we failed to deploy adequate substitutes for ballistic missiles, the conventional and chemical imbalance in Europe would become critical.
- f. Overall the stability of the new strategic regime could be very questionable. The effectiveness of both sides' deterrents would become much more sensitive to technical breakthroughs, especially in stealth technology but also in air defence.
- g. The political and psychological consequences for the Alliance of a switch to air breathing deterrence would be profound. In European eyes such a switch would represent a definite shift by the US away from the concept of extended deterrence, across the Alliance. Alliance cohesion would be put at risk and the credibility of our strategy impaired.



h. It is fanciful to suppose that NATO, either US or Europe, will be able to afford, either in political or financial terms, the immense cost of investing in the extra weapons whilst at the same time upgrading air defences and deploying SDI. A ten year transition period is unrealistic.

i. Even if it should prove impossible to ban ballistic missiles in arms control terms, the stimulation of debate in the Alliance on the subject is in danger of jeopardising support for the maintenance of modernisation of nuclear deterrent forces.

#### The UK Deterrent

j. Our best estimates indicate that the abandonment of Trident and the switch to an air breathing system would double the capital cost of replacing Polaris if we were to maintain the striking power to meet our deterrence criteria. Furthermore, running costs would be at least doubled.

k. There would almost certainly be severe delays in our modernisation programme which would mean either running on an increasingly ineffective Polaris force or suffering a gap of several years in our deterrent capability.

l. Lost time and extra cost apart, there would be severe operational penalties in making the change. Because of range and navigational limitations, sea launched cruise missiles, for instance, are severely constrained by where the submarines can patrol, thereby making them much more vulnerable to detection. The sea room available to Trident is 15 times greater than for a SLCM force. The current generation of air launched cruise missile is similarly vulnerable. The need for frequent and highly visible off base exercises for a large ground launched cruise missile force is very unattractive in political terms and probably excludes this option.

m. Even if the new era never comes to pass the talk of a world without ballistic missiles, and the debate about the efficacy of the alternatives, are already fuelling criticism of the Trident programme and creating domestic political difficulties.