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Factors Relating to Further Consideration of the Future
of the United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrent

Part I. The Politico-Military Requirement

Summary of Report

1. For deterrence to be achieved a potential aggressor must believe that his opponent has the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on him and that there is a real possibility that this capability might be used. NATO's deterrent strategy depends on the link between conventional, theatre nuclear and strategic nuclear forces being maintained and the Soviet Union being convinced that, in response to aggression, the Alliance would if necessary be prepared to escalate the conflict to a level at which the consequences to the Soviet Union would outweigh any possible gains (paragraphs 1-7).

2. As the gains to the Soviet Union from eliminating the United Kingdom would clearly be less than those from eliminating the United States, the United Kingdom can expect to deter aggression by posing a smaller deterrent threat than that posed by the United States. There can be no absolute certainty that, following a massive nuclear attack on the United Kingdom a Government would take a deliberate decision to order a retaliatory strike by the British deterrent. But the essential thing is that the Soviet Government should believe that there is a real possibility of their doing so. Provided our deterrent was perceived to have the capability, the Russians could not rule out this possibility. This is sufficient for deterrence (paragraphs 8-15).

3. Over the next 30-40 years, our planning need not be geared to any nuclear threat beyond that posed by the Soviet Union. We can assume that European links with the United States in the North Atlantic Alliance will continue, though the credibility of American nuclear retaliation in defence of European interests could be weakened (paragraph 16).

4. The case for and against a British strategic nuclear force can best be discussed in terms of the purposes which such a force would serve:

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(i) A numerical contribution to NATO's assigned nuclear forces.

The British deterrent represents a significant proportion of NATO's assigned nuclear forces. The importance of this should not be exaggerated since our deterrent represents only a very small proportion of the total nuclear forces of the Alliance, including the American strategic forces (paragraphs 17-20).

(ii) A second centre of decision making

This is the distinctive nature of our contribution. It complicates Soviet calculations and means that not all nuclear decisions in the Alliance are left exclusively to the United States President. Two situations are envisaged. First, a decline in the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee to Europe. A British nuclear force could provide, with the French, the nucleus of a European deterrent and thus reduce the risk that Germany might seek to develop a nuclear capability. Second, hesitation by the United States to use her nuclear weapons in support of NATO. Neither super-power could exclude the possibility that, in this situation, a British Government might act to make good the weakness of American resolve. On the other hand, it might be argued that the existence of a second centre could imply lack of confidence in the American guarantee and thus undermine its credibility. Moreover the Russians might not believe that the United Kingdom would ever act independently of the United States, especially over an issue not directly affecting United Kingdom territory (paragraphs 21-27).

(iii) A capability for independent defence of national interests.

The British deterrent provides an ultimate option for national defence should collective security fail, which would assist us to counter politico-military pressures or to deter aggression itself. The question is whether it is necessary or credible for us to seek to provide against such a contingency (paragraphs 28-29).

(iv) Political status and influence

To give up our status as a Nuclear Weapon State would be a momentous step in British history. It gives us access to and the possibility of influencing American thinking on defence and arms control policy and has enabled us

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to play a leading role in international arms control and non-proliferation negotiations. But a decision to embark on a new generation of the British deterrent might be seen by many Non Nuclear Weapon States as inconsistent with our declared arms control and non-proliferation aims and thus reduce our capacity to exercise influence in these fields (paragraphs 30-35).

5. The cost of a successor system would be high and funds spent on the deterrent would not be available for our conventional forces. But we would be buying a unique capability which could not be provided by our European allies. On the other hand, it could be argued that, from the Alliance point of view, conventional forces had a higher priority than the maintenance of the British deterrent as a means of ensuring a continuing American commitment to the defence of Europe (paragraphs 36-37).

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