CHAPTER FOUR

BRITISH NUCLEAR STRATEGY

Scientific research in Britain, and in particular the work of the Maud Committee in 1940 and 1941, had demonstrated the feasibility of the uranium isotope, U235 atomic bomb, and the possibility of the plutonium bomb. The report gave an added impetus to research in the United States and a fully collaborative venture was in being by 1943. Britain was, therefore, totally involved in the original development of atomic weapons. There was a natural assumption that, as a great power and victor of the war, Britain would continue to take a leading role in atomic energy research and development after 1945.

The new Labour government was only a week old when the Hiroshima bomb was dropped on 6 August 1945. Margaret Gowing has written a comprehensive exposition of the decision-making processes which led to the British atomic bomb.1 Although no decision to produce an atomic bomb was taken initially, the Cabinet sub-committee, GEN 75, set up a research establishment at Harwell tasked with investigating all aspects of atomic energy. It soon became clear that the Americans had no intention of sharing the fruits of their own atomic research, and in August 1946, the McMahon Act made the exchange of all such information illegal.

Although there was no political decision to produce atomic weapons, the military were convinced of the need to have an atomic capability to match any other power which might develop such weapons. At the end of 1945, the Chiefs of Staff were pressing for two atomic piles to be built, as they would need as many atomic bombs as possible.2 In August 1946, the Chief of the Air Staff put in a demand through normal procurement channels for an atomic bomb.3 The political decision to proceed was taken in January 1947. The bomb was developed quite independently of the United States, and successfully tested on 3 October 1952. It was assumed that the build up of nuclear stockpiles in America and Russia would be comparatively slow, and that the British force would therefore be of major significance in deterring the use of Soviet bombs against the British isles.4

INCREASING RELIANCE ON THE NUCLEAR THREAT

The 1952 Chiefs of Staff Global Strategy Paper argued that more reliance should be placed on nuclear threats to contain Soviet expansion.5 The nuclear arsenal was seen as the counter to the Soviet conventional force superiority. It was not until 1956 that Britain had a significant operational nuclear capability with the coming into service of the V-bomber force. The dependence on the effectiveness of this force was such that the following year, the Defence White Paper stated that large conventional forces would no longer be necessary.6 The 800,000 men in the armed forces in 1956 were to be reduced to 375000 by 1962. The 1958 Defence White Paper made it clear that the nuclear deterrent forces were the mainstay of defence:

> *In fact, the strategy of NATO is based on the frank recognition that a full-scale Soviet attack could not be repelled without resort to a massive nuclear bombardment of the sources of power in Russia.'* 7

There was a complete reliance on a massive retaliation strategy as a response to Soviet aggression; and Britain was the first country to base its national defence upon a declared policy of nuclear deterrence.8 The potential vulnerability of the aircraft delivery system, even with the stand-off Blue Steel glide bomb, was recognised. A ballistic missile, Blue Streak, was therefore to be developed. It was cancelled in 1960, when it was appreciated that the likely cost of £600 million would eventually provide an obsolete system, which, because of liquid fuelling and soft launchers, would be vulnerable to surprise attack. America was prepared to supply an air launched ballistic missile

November 1962, the United States announced the cancellation of the Skybolt programme. Technical problems and the vulnerability of aircraft-based systems made the Minuteman and Polaris much more attractive prospects to them. Prime Minister Macmillan salvaged the situation by obtaining an extremely advantageous agreement from President Kennedy, at Nassau in December 1962, for the supply of Polaris to Britain. An American technical and economic decision was therefore responsible for the radical change in the basis of the British deterrent: Polaris could have been opted for in 1960 if it had been preferred to Skybolt.9

THE CONTRIBUTION TO NATO

The Nassau agreement formalised the assignment of the British nuclear forces to NATO, and brought them into the American nuclear targeting plan. Macmillan insisted on preserving the option for independent use in the supreme national interest. This independence clause may have been predominantly to preserve Britain's great power role; but France was already expressing concern over the credibility of the American nuclear support for Europe, and this may have been a factor. In 1964, the Defence White Paper did consider the possibility of a 'mistaken' Soviet belief in the unwillingness of America to defend Europe, and hence the need for a European nuclear power. 10

The Labour government of 1964 played down the independent aspect of Britain's nuclear forces. The 1965 Defence Estimates centred on the contribution to NATO and the proposed, but never to be formed, Atlantic Nuclear Force. The only reference to possible independent use was in relation to the Chinese atomic test, and the ability of the British nuclear force to provide some reassurance to non-nuclear powers. 11 The lack of direction in British nuclear strategy was expressed in an Editorial of the Royal United Services Institute Journal in 1966, to mark the launching of HMS Resolution, the first of the Polaris submarines:

> *The political background to Polaris has been more troubled than the background to what one might call the purely hardware side, mainly because there is no authoritative statement of what the British Polaris fleet is expected to achieve. l 2*

The emergence of the doctrine of flexible response in the United States in the early 1960s was not greeted with great enthusiasm by Britain. A strategy which called for more conventional forces and greater manpower was not economically attractive. When the doctrine was adopted as official NATO policy in 1967, the British Army was some 191,000 strong; virtually half its size ten years before. The size has not subsequently increased, and therefore Britain uses fewer conventional forces when following a strategy of graduated response than when it adhered to a massive retaliation policy.

THE SECOND DECISION CENTRE

The unwillingness of Britain and the other European NATO countries greatly to enhance their conventional capabilities meant that, notwithstanding flexible response, the American strategic nuclear guarantee remained the basis of the security of Western Europe. Yet as North America became more and more vulnerable to the Soviet strategic arsenal, this guarantee became less credible. In this dilemma, the British deterrent had a new role to play. Defence Minister, Denis Healey has been credited with first postulating the 'second centre for decision making strategy in 1964.13 Through the 1970s, this concept was used in official statements about nuclear forces, and in the 1980 Open Government Document discussing the choice of the Polaris replacement, it was the major consideration: *If Britain is to meet effectively the deterrent purpose of providing a second centre of decision-making within the alliance, our force has to be visibly capable of posing a massive threat on its own.* 14

The philosophy of this doctrine was explained by the Defence Minister, Francis Pym, as follows:

The decision to use nuclear weapons would be an agonising one for any national leadership and the Soviets must know this; but to have to calculate whether either of two powers would be prepared to do so if pressed to the extremity, doubles their uncertainty, complicates their planning and increases their risks. It is in this way that our strategic and theatre nuclear forces contribute so much to the collective deterrence of the Alliance.15

FUTURE TRENDS

The decision to replace the Polaris fleet with Trident, combined with NATO Theatre Nuclear Forces modernisation proposals, resulted in considerable public debate in Britain over nuclear strategy. The Labour party, in opposition, adopted the unilateral nuclear disarmament of Britain as policy at its 1980 conference, and stated in its 1983 election manifesto:

Labour's commitment is to establish a non-nuclear defence policy for this country. This means the rejection of any fresh nuclear bases or weapons on British soil or in British waters, and the removal of all existing nuclear bases and weapons, thus enabling us to make a direct contribution to an eventually much wider nuclear-free zone in Europe.16

Another rationale for the independent nuclear force is in the process of emerging. The replacement for Polaris will be - operating well into the next century, by which time there may be many new lesser nuclear weapon states, and old alliances may have changed radically. In this unknown future, Defence Minister John Nott argued that Britain must have its own invulnerable deterrent force, to secure the country against any nuclear threat.17 The British electorate appeared to support this view, and returned the Conservative Government.