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PM/78/145

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister

An important minute by Dr. Owers. You have already expressed interest in the idea at 'X'.
GJM
19/7

Future of the British Deterrent

1. As my minute of 11 December makes clear, I am not convinced by the contention in the earlier parts of the officials' paper that the ability to destroy at least ten major cities, or inflict damage on 30 major targets, * ~~~~~ * is the minimum criterion for a British deterrent. It follows therefore that I do not accept the requirements which Part III of the study now postulates for numbers of detonations and missiles. Indeed, I believe that some of the force options which the Part III study suggests are unrealistic in relation to the financial resources likely to be available for the nuclear deterrent aspect of the defence equipment budget over the next 10-15 years. The "smaller, cheaper force using cruise missiles" to which Sir John Hunt refers in paragraph 5 of his covering minute is an option which not only needs further study, but is intrinsically more attractive than the officials' paper allows.

2. The paper argues that attacks on ten cities (criteria option 3a) requires more than 300 cruise missiles to be launched to give a 50% chance of achieving the specified damage. If we accept fewer cities as our criteria, then the number of cruise missiles can be reduced proportionately, though admittedly some extra allowance may need to be made for aircraft interception. The oddest aspect of the officials' paper is their advocacy of a purpose-built cruise missile carrier, of about the size of our present SSBN, to carry about 80 cruise missiles. On this basis they argue that submarine deployment will be one or two years later and that the cost will not be much different from a ballistic missile system. Paragraph 26 does mention the alternative, which I believe needs far more serious study, of deploying submarine-launched cruise missiles on existing SSNs. But it does not feature as a major part of the paper. We currently plan an SSN fleet of around 19 by the end of the 1990s. We need the SSNs anyway for non-nuclear purposes - and I have long advocated an increase in the SSN-building programme on its own merits. Equipping each of them with the ability to fire a salvo of five cruise missiles from their torpedo tubes need not be an unacceptable detraction from their other roles, and it would

/be possible

* passage deleted and retained under section 3(4).

Wayland 16 July 2009

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be possible to increase the number of cruise missiles carried by those submarines deployed on deterrent patrols.

3. Dispersing our nuclear capability over a number of submarines mitigates the major vulnerability of our present four SSBNs. The vulnerability to Soviet ASW measures of a submarine force limited to four boats is undoubtedly growing as tracking techniques improve. As the paper argues, a force of eight submarines, allowing three on continuous patrol, adds greatly to the credibility of the force. We need to know urgently whether there are any major technical problems in installing the US Tomahawk cruise missile in our SSNs. We also need to know the nature of the command and control problems referred to in paragraph 26. I do not understand the reference to problems over a dispersed submarine-based deterrent force, while in paragraph 29 a combined ballistic and cruise missile force, using the submarine cruise missile force in a theatre role, is discussed. The command and control problem will presumably exist in whatever situation missiles are fired.

4. Fuller analysis is also required on that part of the paper which deals with the effective life of the present Polaris force. I am strongly in favour of keeping the present force in operation as long as possible. The next 10-15 years are likely to bring important developments in the politico-military and arms control field, which could alter drastically the basis on which we currently assess our national deterrent requirement. This argues for extending the life of Polaris, looking flexibly at cruise missiles and keeping our options open as long as we can. I am not convinced by the argument in the officials' paper that 1979 is the decision point.

5. US naval sources argue that the life of the Polaris submarine hulls themselves can be prolonged virtually indefinitely, and certainly to the year 2000, through replacement and upgrading of some of their ancillary and propulsion equipment. As to the possible constraints on missile life referred to in paragraph 7b of Annex A to the paper, could we not if we wished to keep Polaris going take advantage of the fact that all the American Polaris missiles will be withdrawn from service in the early 1980s, and ask the United States to make all their Polaris missiles available to us? I suspect if you put this to

/President

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President Carter at Guadeloupe the answer would be yes, and you might, like Macmillan, get them at a bargain price. I also hope you could sound out President Carter on our being able to purchase Tomahawk cruise missiles. The French might be interested and the Germans might want to purchase land-based cruise missiles on a double key basis.

6. If we can in 1979 credibly decide to extend the life of the Polaris vessels, albeit at some increase in running costs, and consider deploying cruise missiles in SSNs, we will have kept open our future options at minimal cost and the subject could be re-examined in 1983.

7. I am copying this minute to Denis Healey, Fred Mulley and Sir John Hunt.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'D Owen', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

(DAVID OWEN)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

19 December 1978

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