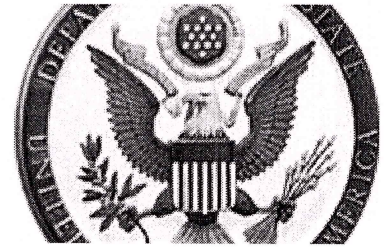


guardian.co.uk

The US embassy cables:
The documents



US embassy cables: Brown's Trident announcement 'caught Whitehall by surprise'

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 8 December 2010 23.00 GMT

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Thursday, 24 September 2009, 15:46

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 002222

NOFORN

SIPDIS

EO 12958 DECL: 09/22/2024

TAGS POGOV, PREL, MARR, MOPS, MCAP, KNNP, PARM, UK

SUBJECT: PM BROWN'S DECISION TO CONSIDER REDUCING THE UK'S TRIDENT NUCLEAR DETERRENT

REF: A. LONDON 2186 (NOTAL) B. LONDON 1707 (NOTAL) C. EMBASSY LONDON DAILY REPORT 9/16/2009 (NOTAL) D. EMBASSY LONDON DAILY REPORT 9/21/2009 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin Quinville for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S/NF) *Summary. Prime Minister Brown's September 23 announcement at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) that the UK is prepared to consider reducing from four to three the number of its nuclear submarines caught many in HMG by surprise. That said, there has been increased discussion in recent months within HMG and Conservative Party circles about the most effective way to cut defense costs, in the face of a surging budget deficit, and maintain an effective defense, even if HMG sources downplay the fiscal basis for a possible fleet reduction. HMG sources stress that the UK remains committed to maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent -- as did Brown himself during his UNGA speech. HMG sources also note that reducing the number of submarines from four to three would not necessarily reduce the total number of missiles*

or operational nuclear warheads in the British arsenal. They strongly emphasize that any reduction must be consistent with maintaining a "continuous at sea deterrent." Julian Miller, the Deputy Head of the Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, assured the Political Minister Counselor September 24 that HMG would consult with the U.S. regarding future developments concerning the Trident deterrent to assure there would be "no daylight" between the U.S. and UK. End Summary.

2. (SBU/NF) Cabinet Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials confirmed to Poloff September 23 Prime Minister Brown's plans to announce at UNGA that Great Britain would be prepared to reduce from four to three the number of nuclear submarines that carry nuclear weapons. Foreign Minister Miliband publicly explained the decision by observing that "President Obama has injected new drive into the effort to meet the goals of the (Nuclear) Nonproliferation Treaty, which is a world free of nuclear weapons, and our Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is determined that Britain plays its full part in those discussions." (Note: The UK Trident system consists of 160 operational nuclear warheads carried by Trident II (D5) ballistic missiles aboard four Vanguard-class nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines. The warheads and submarines are British built, but with substantial American design assistance. End Note.)

3. (SBU) According to the transcript of PM Brown's wide-ranging September 23 speech to UNGA (a transcript is available at www.number10.gov.uk), Brown stated that "all nuclear weapons states must play their part in reducing nuclear weapons as part of an agreement by non nuclear states to renounce them...In line with maintaining our nuclear deterrent, I have asked our national security committee to report to me on the potential future reduction of our nuclear weapons submarines from four to three." He described his overall proposal regarding nuclear weapons reduction as a "grand global bargain between nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapons states." HMG officials confirmed to Poloff that Brown would elaborate on his proposal at the September 24 UNSC Heads of State meeting.

Timing is Everything

4. (S/NF) *The announcement of a proposed fleet reduction caught many in the MOD, FCO and Cabinet Office by surprise. Dr. Richard Freer (strictly protect) Head of Defence and Security Policy in the Cabinet Office's Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat, told Poloff September 23 that "in an ideal world, we'd have done a bit more pre-vetting." One of Freer's Cabinet Office deputies was blunter, separately telling Poloff that the announcement was "unexpected" by Cabinet Office staff. MOD officials separately told DAO Embassy London that the announcement was unexpected.*

5. (S/NF) Both Freer and Judith Gough (strictly protect), Deputy Head of the Security Policy Group at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, stressed to Poloff that HMG has not formally decided to scale back the deterrent but would only do so if a government defense review determines, in Freer's words, that it would be "technically feasible" to maintain "continuous deterrence patrols" with three submarines instead of four. All sources stressed that HMG remains committed to an independent nuclear deterrent. The PM's spokesman publicly affirmed that HMG is committed to maintaining "an

LONDON 00002222 002 OF 003

effective nuclear deterrent." Freer criticized media for exaggerating the significance of Brown's announcement, opining that it was "not really a major disarmament announcement," but rather a reaffirmation of HMG's commitment to nuclear disarmament, albeit not unilaterally.

P5 Reassurances

6. (C/NF) Mariot Leslie, the Director General for Defence and Intelligence at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), told representatives of P5 embassies at a September 23 briefing that HMG remains committed to a nuclear deterrent "at a minimum level consistent with (the UK's) deterrence doctrine." She underscored that HMG had not made a commitment to reduce its fleet from four to three submarines, but would only do so if three submarines could maintain "continuous at sea deterrence." She stated that HMG's eventual decision would not depend upon the actions of other nuclear weapons states, but would be based entirely on Britain's defense needs. She referenced the UK's 2006 White Paper, that mentioned the possibility of reducing the submarine fleet from four to three vessels, if consistent with defense requirements. She also noted that the review of the number of submarines was unrelated to the issue of how many missiles and warheads the UK would retain, a point that other HMG officials also made to Poloff.

7. (C/NF). Leslie explained to the P5 embassy representatives that she had requested a meeting with them in order to respond to "speculation" in the British press about what PM Brown would announce at the UN. She underscored the importance of close coordination among the P5, especially in the lead up next year's Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon), and she urged P5 delegations "to keep in touch in New York." She stressed HMG's commitment to a successful RevCon, and underscored that P5 cooperation was essential for a successful outcome.

"No Daylight"

8. (S/NF) Julian Miller, the Deputy Head of the Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, assured the Political Minister Counselor September 24 that HMG would consult with the U.S. regarding future developments concerning the Trident deterrent to assure there would be "no daylight" between the U.S. and UK. He noted that it is "still an open question" as to whether three new submarines would be able to provide continuous deterrence. Like Leslie, Miller referenced the 2006 White Paper, stressing that a possible reduction from four to three submarines was not a "fundamentally new position."

Money Matters

9. (C/NF) In recent months there has been increased discussion within HMG and Conservative Party circles and among defense analysts about the most effective way to cut costs while getting value for money, in the face of a surging budget deficit. Many estimates indicate that it would cost 20 billion pounds, spread over two decades, to replace all four of the aging Vanguard fleet. It is debatable how much cost savings would be generated by cutting the replacement program by one quarter; one estimate places total savings as low as three billion pounds. Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth declared in a September 15 speech that operations in Afghanistan illustrate that the world has rapidly and significantly changed in the decade since Britain last conducted a Strategic Defense Review (SDR). He noted that "some assumptions of the SDR have now been overtaken by events." Ainsworth stressed that "there will be tough choices ahead" and that "major shifts" in defense spending could not be ruled out. He outlined the process for an updated SDR, starting with a Defence Green Paper to be published in early 2010. In an interview following the speech, Ainsworth indicated, in regard to the UK's independent Trident nuclear deterrent, that "if we can provide that at-sea deterrent with three submarines and not four submarines we will look at that."

10. (C/NF) *Conservative Party defense sources have privately affirmed to Embassy officers their commitment to the Trident deterrent.* They have also acknowledged that reducing to three submarines would be one effective cost-saving measure to consider as part of a Strategic Defense Review, which the

LONDON 00002222 003 OF 003

Conservatives have promised to undertake if they win next year's general election. Shadow Conservative Defense Secretary Liam Fox told the BBC following Brown's speech that the PM's proposal seemed "reasonable and sensible," so long as the UK could maintain a continuous at-sea deterrent. Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg

welcomed Brown's announcement to consider scaling back Trident, stating that it is "unrealistic" to believe the UK could foot the bill for renewing Trident.

11. (S/NF) Foreign Secretary Miliband publicly rejected on September 22 assertions that scaling back Trident would be a cost-cutting measure. Julian Miller also downplayed the potential fiscal impact of a reduction, telling the Political Minister Counselor that it is still unclear whether a reduction to three submarines would create significant savings. Miller stressed that a reduction in the number of submarines was one way to "show commitment to the disarmament agenda."

Comment: A Popular Decision

12. (S/NF) Brown's readiness to cut the size of Britain's Trident fleet will please a large segment of the British public -- both fiscal hawks and disarmament doves, although some in the latter camp would just as soon see the UK scrap its deterrent entirely. Indeed, July polling indicates that 54 percent of British voters would "prefer to abandon nuclear weapons rather than put money into a new generation of Trident warheads." (Ref B) *HMG sources stress that both Brown and Miliband are personally committed to nuclear disarmament, albeit not unilaterally.* Miliband most recently signaled his commitment to disarmament in an op-ed in the September 20 "Guardian" newspaper, reminding readers that the UK has reduced its nuclear arsenal 75 percent since the end of the Cold War. (Ref D) Toward the end of the op-ed, he hinted at PM Brown's readiness to scale back Trident: "As soon as it becomes useful for the UK arsenal to be included in a broader negotiation, we stand ready to participate and act."

Visit London's Classified Website: http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:United_Kingdom

SUSMAN

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010