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1. POLARIS IMPROVEMENTS

The Meeting considered a minute MO 18/1/1 of 7 July 1976 from the Secretary of State for Defence to the Prime Minister about measures to improve our Polaris system to counter Russian anti-ballistic missile defences.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that in September 1975 Ministers had agreed that it was right to proceed with the Chevaline project under which Polaris would be fitted with a sophisticated combination of hardened warheads and decoys. Following that decision he had introduced a new management organisation for Chevaline and had carried out a thorough review of the project. This had confirmed that Chevaline should give us a credible deterrent until the present submarines reached the end of their operational lives in about 1994: two submarines deploying Chevaline in the Atlantic would be capable of penetrating the anti-ballistic missile defences of Moscow. But the review had also shown that the deployment of Chevaline was likely to be later than previously expected. It would not be at sea in the first submarine until 1981 and in the second until 1982. This slippage in the programme meant that there would be a rather longer gap in our capability to threaten Moscow than we had previously supposed. Until the end of 1979 we should be able to hit Moscow from the Mediterranean by deploying one or more submarines there in time of tension. But we could not be sure of penetrating the defences of Moscow once the Russians had installed battle management radar coverage of the South West approach to Moscow. This they might do by 1979-80. Provided the Russians' own programme did not slip, there was therefore likely to be a gap during which we could not threaten Moscow, though we would continue to be able to hit cities outside the anti-ballistic missile defences. The review had also indicated that the estimated real costs of the Chevaline programme must be increased by £153 million. The increase would be spread over nine years, though a large part would fall between 1978-79 and 1982-83. His judgment, formed after a personal visit to the establishment where development was being carried out, was that the Chevaline project remained realistic and should be completed. It should give us a credible strategic deterrent for a period of at least 12 years and this would be a good return for the money spent. Containing the increased costs within the reduced defence budget would present problems, which he hoped would be viewed sympathetically by the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the defence long-term costings were next considered. Nevertheless his preference would be that full development of Chevaline should now be approved although he recognised that the Chancellor of the Exchequer might find this difficult to accept. The recent slippage in the project and increase in its cost was in large part due to the uncertainties associated with short term funding.

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