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GABINETMOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD
TO
CG(82) 2nd CONCLUSIONS

Thursday 21 January 1982

THE UNITED
KINGDOM
STRATEGIC
NUCLEAR
DETERRENTPrevious
Reference:
CG(80) 29th
Conclusions,
Minute 1

THE PRIME MINISTER said that, as the Cabinet would recall, the decision to acquire Trident to replace Polaris as the United Kingdom strategic nuclear deterrent had been announced in July 1980, following agreement with the Carter Administration. The decision was to adopt the American Trident 1(C4) missile to be carried in a new British submarine based closely on the American submarines currently carrying Poseidon and C4 missiles. Since then the Ministry of Defence had carried forward the technical and financial studies on the project which were only possible after the decision had been made public. In October 1981 President Reagan had announced his decision to deploy the Trident 2 (D5) missile in 1989, and to phase out the Trident 1 missile by 1998. The President had indicated that if Britain wished to buy Trident 2 he would agree. A group of Ministers under her chairmanship had been considering this question. They were in no doubt that Britain should continue to have her own independent strategic nuclear deterrent, and that the possibility of acquiring Trident 2 rather than Trident 1 should be seriously considered, provided that satisfactory terms could be negotiated with the Americans. The choice was one of great technical complexity and had considerable financial implications. Over the whole 15 year period of the project the extra capital cost of acquiring Trident 2 would on a July 1980 price and exchange rate basis be about £600 million, bringing the total capital cost over the period to £6 billion if the decision were to go for a 4 boat force; at September 1981 prices and exchange rates the total rose to £7½ billion. The through-life running costs would be likely to be lower in the case of Trident 2, because it would be operating in parallel with an American programme. Both capital and running costs could be accommodated within the defence budget without unacceptable consequences for the conventional defence effort; and in the next four years Trident 2 would in fact cost less than Trident 1. She therefore intended to send a message to President Reagan to suggest that a small team of senior officials should visit Washington to discuss the terms on which the Americans would be willing to make available, if required, the technology, equipment and materials necessary for Trident 2. When these negotiations were completed the matter would be brought back to the Cabinet for decision. Meanwhile the Secretary of State for Defence would be ready to arrange a full briefing, for any member of the Cabinet who wished,

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on the strategic, technical and financial background to the issue. It was of the utmost importance that there should be no leak or public indication of the Government's position, in order not to prejudice the success of the negotiations in Washington. The record of the present discussion should therefore be retained by the Secretary of the Cabinet and not circulated to members of the Cabinet.

In the course of a brief discussion it was noted that any member of the Cabinet who wished to receive the suggested briefing would need to allow 2½ hours for the purpose. The complexities of the potential choice could not be adequately explained in any shorter period. Interested Ministers would contact the Secretary of State for Defence on an individual basis, observing maximum discretion. The Secretary of State for Defence would be discussing separately with the Secretary of State for Scotland the implications for the shore facilities required.

The Cabinet -

Took note.

Cabinet Office

25 January 1982

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