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MISC 7(83) 2nd Meeting

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NUCLEAR DEFENCE POLICY

MINUTES of a Meeting held in
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 8 MARCH 1983 at 4.30 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP
Secretary of State for Defence

ALSO PRESENT

Field Marshall Sir Edwin Bramall
Chief of the Defence Staff

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr A D S Goodall
Mr R L L Facer

SUBJECT

BASING OF UNITED STATES CRUISE MISSILES ?

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

BASING OF UNITED STATES CRUISE MISSILES

Previous Reference: MISC 7(83)1st Meeting

Ministers resumed their consideration of control arrangements for United States Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) to be based in the United Kingdom. They had before them a minute from the Secretary of State for Defence dated 25 January about the timing of the deployment of GLCMs at Greenham Common; a minute from the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary dated 26 January about the consequences for the Alliance of any major new initiative on the control issue; a minute from the Secretary of State for Defence dated 4 March about arrangements for delaying the delivery of cruise missiles and related equipment until November, and on the possibilities for increasing the British component in the manning and guarding of the cruise missile force; and a minute from the Secretary of the Cabinet dated 4 March reporting discussions by officials in Washington on the updating of the Murphy-Dean Agreement on procedures for joint decision concerning United States nuclear weapons based in the United Kingdom.

THE DEFENCE SECRETARY said that his officials had now confirmed with the United States that the Government would not wish major items of cruise missile equipment to be delivered to Greenham Common before November. The Americans had prepared a revised schedule for the delivery of equipment and for the training of the cruise missile force under which no cruise missile transporter-erector-launchers, launch control centres, missiles or warheads would arrive before 1 November. There would be no off-base flight dispersal training until 1984. The United States authorities still wished to deliver before November some ancillary equipment. He would propose to them that certain large items should be delayed. He had also considered increasing the British component in the manning and guarding of the cruise missile force. He proposed to double the contribution to the force responsible for the defence of the missiles which would accompany them at all times whether on the base or at dispersed sites. Some 200 Royal Air Force Regiment personnel, in addition to the 220 which it had already been agreed to provide, would be required. Provided that the increase was phased rather than achieved immediately, there would be no insuperable problems; but it would be necessary to consider command and communication arrangements. The increased British component would amount to up to two-thirds of the total force.

Page 1 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

MR GOODALL said that he had visited Washington on 1 March, accompanied by officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, to put to the United States Administration proposals for updating the secret Murphy-Dean Agreement covering the procedures for implementing the understanding on joint decision relating to United States nuclear weapons based on United Kingdom territory. Once they were reassured that the British Government regarded this as a self-contained exercise, separate from the wider issues of public presentation and dual key control, the Americans had agreed to co-operate in a radical redrafting of the Murphy-Dean Agreement and had accepted that this should be done on the basis of the British proposals. The leader of the United States team, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the State Department, Mr Eagleburger, had told him that the Administration was closely watching the public debate in the United Kingdom on the issue of the control of United States nuclear weapons. It had been explained to him that part of the purpose of updating the Murphy-Dean Agreement would be to ensure that British Ministers were in a position to continue to take in good faith the public line that they were satisfied that the arrangements for implementing the existing understandings were fully effective. Mr Eagleburger had expressed his admiration for the firmness with which British Ministers were resisting the Parliamentary pressures to explain details of the arrangements, but said that some of the language which Ministers were using, notably the term "joint control" as distinct from "joint decision" was causing great concern in Washington. The Americans believed that the more public attention that was focussed on the special arrangements between the United Kingdom and the United States, the greater the risk of the other Allies seeking similar arrangements. The Italians were now pressing for some form of dual control for the GLCMs to be based on Italy. The effect on deterrence could be gravely damaging. Mr Eagleburger had emphasised that, if the Government decided that it was necessary to have a stronger public formula, it would be vital to discuss this with the United States Administration and obtain their agreement. In the discussions about the revised procedures themselves, the British side had left a draft text, explaining that it had not been shown to Ministers. The Americans would have alternative language to suggest, but the only substantive difficulty which had emerged from the first round of talks was over the proposal that there should be joint decision before nuclear-armed cruise missiles

Page 2 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

were deployed off their bases as well as before they were fired. The Americans had explained that this requirement would raise very serious problems, since they drew a clear distinction in their own command and control arrangements between measures relating to the actual use of nuclear weapons, which required authorisation at the highest political level, and measures designed to ensure survivability, which were within the discretion of the relevant military commander. Furthermore, the Murphy-Dean Agreement allowed for nuclear-armed aircraft to be dispersed or even put into the air under positive control without prior consultation between the President and the Prime Minister: The Americans had sought an assurance, which had been given, that it was not the British intention to restrict the discretion allowed to military commanders to disperse nuclear-armed aircraft or put them into the air under positive control in advance of a joint political decision on the use of their weapons. The Americans had been left in no doubt, however, that as far as cruise missiles were concerned the British side attached great importance to providing in the secret agreement for off-base deployment to be subject to joint decision.

In discussion the point was made that, while the Government were now winning the argument against unilateralist critics of their nuclear defence policies, there was still widespread public and parliamentary concern about the control arrangements for the cruise missiles. Some 35 Conservatives had signed an early day motion calling for dual key control, which its sponsor, Mr Alan Clark, had been persuaded to withdraw. Leading members of the Opposition parties could not reasonably criticise the arrangements concerning United States nuclear capable aircraft and Poseidon submarines since they had been party to them when in Government; but they would continue to criticise the lack of a dual key arrangement for the cruise missiles by analogy with the only other land-based missile system that had been stationed in the United Kingdom, the Thor missiles, to which dual key arrangements had applied. In attempting to counter this criticism Ministers had already enlarged upon the public joint decision formula as set out in the Truman-Churchill Understanding of 1952 by saying that joint decision meant joint control, that use of the bases covered use of the systems and that the deployment of cruise missiles off their bases would be covered by the existing understandings. It was clear that, under existing North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

Page 3 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

alert procedures, the British Government would be consulted before authority was given to the relevant military commander to disperse the cruise missiles from their bases; but in an emergency where a nuclear attack appeared imminent the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) would have the authority to disperse the missiles without political agreement in order to ensure their survival. It might be possible to negotiate agreement with the United States Government for joint decision on deployment of cruise missiles off their bases, if Her Majesty's Government were prepared to enter into a side understanding with the United States which would recognise that there would be the need for swift action in an emergency of this sort. It was hardly conceivable that in the event of a crisis any President of the United States would ignore the understanding to reach a joint decision with the Prime Minister on nuclear release; if he believed that the British Government might refuse a request for the release of nuclear weapons based in the United Kingdom, there were many alternative weapons available under sole United States control. It was in any case unlikely that the cruise missiles based in the United Kingdom would be among the weapons selected for an initial nuclear strike. In practice the cruise missiles could not be deployed without the active co-operation of Royal Air Force personnel. It might be possible to arrange for confirmation of the Prime Minister's assent to a joint decision to be separately conveyed, via British channels, to the base commander or to the commander of the British component at the base, so that an order to fire would not be validated unless and until such confirmation was received at the base. It would in any case be necessary to answer questions about the command and control arrangements governing the British component in the manning and guarding force, and this would require further study.

In further discussion the point was made that there would be damaging repercussions if the United Kingdom were to ask for dual key control of United States cruise missiles. The deployment of Alliance long-range nuclear forces was intended both to counter the threat from the Soviet SS 20 missiles and to couple the United States strategic nuclear deterrent firmly to the defence of Europe. If the only American weapons capable of striking the territory of the Soviet Union were the strategic weapons based in the United States, then there would be a risk that the Americans might not be prepared to use them for fear of provoking massive retaliation on the United States itself. Any dual key system

Page 4 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

would be less effective as a deterrent than a single key one. A request for dual key at this stage would create the impression that the objective was now to be in a position to restrain the United States rather than to ensure that she was ready to defend the Allies. If the Americans felt that the United Kingdom had lost confidence in them, this would have serious effects for their attitude to co-operating with the United Kingdom, particularly on the Trident programme. If the United Kingdom were to ask for dual key, the Italians would press for it. The Germans were precluded by their own internal political imperatives from acquiring even an indirect share in control over a nuclear weapons system which could strike the territory of the Soviet Union, and German acceptance of long-range theatre nuclear weapons had always been conditional on at least one other European nation taking the weapons under similar conditions. There was thus a risk that a British request for dual key would jeopardise the whole decision taken by NATO in 1979 to deploy these weapons. This would be a grave setback for the Alliance and a victory for the Soviet Union.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that it was essential to maintain the credibility of the Alliance's nuclear deterrent, which rested in the last resort on mutual confidence between the United States and her allies, especially the United Kingdom. This basic requirement would be jeopardised if the United Kingdom were to seek dual key control over the United States cruise missiles which were to be based here. She noted that the Defence Secretary proposed to seek to increase the British component in the manning and guarding of the cruise missile force, and that further consideration would need to be given to the command and communication arrangements for the British component. The arrangements for implementing the existing joint decision understandings should be made as watertight as possible. But the Government's continued ability to defend the adequacy of the joint decision understandings would depend crucially on being able to take a more explicit and positive public line than hitherto on joint decision, with American support. In continuing the negotiations with the Americans over the updating of the Murphy-Dean Agreement, officials should maintain the British requirement for a provision that off-base deployment of cruise missiles should not take place without the Prime Minister's agreement; but this would be on the understanding, which might be expressed separately, that SACEUR could have standing authority to deploy the weapons off-base in an emergency.

Page 5 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

if that were necessary in order to ensure their survival. The negotiations should be pursued urgently, and should be ad referendum to Ministers at each stage. As soon as it had been established that satisfactory provisions could be negotiated for an updated Murphy-Dean Agreement, it would be necessary to broach with the Americans the need for a new and more forthcoming public line. The most convincing element in this for British public opinion would be a public statement by the President of the United States that he would not contemplate the possibility of any decision on the release of United States nuclear weapons based in the United Kingdom to which the Prime Minister was not a party. It might have to be made clear to the Americans at the appropriate moment that only something along these lines would enable the Government to resist the political pressures on them to seek dual key control. In that event it would be necessary to prepare the ground with the Americans for a high-level approach in this sense.

The Meeting -

1. Instructed the Secretary of the Cabinet, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence
 - i. to continue negotiations with the United States Administration on the revision of the Murphy-Dean Agreement on the basis outlined by the Prime Minister in her summing up of the discussion and to report.
 - ii. to consider the form, content and timing of a high-level approach to the United States Administration about the need for a new public line on joint decision and to make recommendations.
2. Approved the arrangements proposed by the Secretary of State for Defence for the delivery of cruise missile equipment to the United Kingdom.

Cabinet Office

10 March 1983

Page 6 of 6 pages

TOP SECRET