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MISC 7(83) 1st Meeting

CABINET

NUCLEAR DEFENCE POLICY

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
THURSDAY 27 JANUARY 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 Marshal 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

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BASING OF UNITED STATES CRUISE MISSILES

Previous Reference: MISC 7(82) 4th Meeting

Ministers had before them minutes from the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to the Prime Minister dated 25 and 26 January on control arrangements for United States Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) to be based in the United Kingdom; and a minute from the Secretary of State for Defence to the Prime Minister dated 25 January on the timing of the deployment of GLCMs at Greenham Common.

THE DEFENCE SECRETARY said that there were four options for change in the control arrangements for United States GLCMs to be based in the United Kingdom. The first was to refine or improve existing arrangements for political consultation; the second to increase the participation of British Servicemen either by increasing the British contribution to the joint security force at Greenham Common or by providing some of the manpower needed to operate the GLCM vehicles and launch control centres; third, to re-engineer the launch control system to provide a physical dual key system one part of which would be under British control; and, fourth, to own the whole missile system and man it with British personnel, with the United States retaining custody of the warheads. The first two options did not go to the heart of the matter, which was the physical control of the weapon system; but the remaining two options, which would give the United Kingdom physical control, would be expensive, would delay the deployment of the missiles beyond the date agreed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and would be seen as evidence of distrust of American intentions. The United Kingdom had been offered the fourth option in 1979 but the Government had rejected it principally on grounds of cost. The present system for the control of United States nuclear weapons in this country, which rested on agreement that a decision to use them would be taken by the two Governments jointly, had operated satisfactorily under successive Governments and applied to the existing United States F111 aircraft and Poseidon submarines. There were no defence grounds for seeking new control arrangements. The Soviet Union clearly saw the stationing of cruise missiles in Europe as a strengthening of the Western deterrent. It must be a Soviet aim to weaken the degree of American control in the hope that they could more easily scare the

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Europeans into refusing to allow the Americans to launch the missiles. The Soviet Government would presumably therefore welcome a move by the British Government to seek a dual key arrangement for GLCMs in the United Kingdom. It was not clear how changes in control arrangements would affect public attitudes towards the deployment itself. A change in the United Kingdom's attitudes to control would have severe consequences for the position of the Federal German Government. Further consideration of the problem should therefore await the outcome of the German elections on 6 March.

In discussion the following points were made.

- a. The agreed public position on control arrangements raised questions which the Government was at present unable to answer. It would be helpful if President Reagan were to make a speech making clear the United States Government's commitment to the joint decision arrangement.
- b. Enlarging the British presence at Greenham Common would give the impression to the British public that the United States would not in practice be able to deploy cruise missiles outside the base without British agreement. Since the United States Administration had reacted favourably when the question of joint training in the operation of cruise missiles had been raised with them in December, it might also be possible to negotiate some degree of joint operation: this could be introduced after the initial deployment, and need not therefore delay it.
- c. Although British public opinion was strongly in favour of membership of NATO and against unilateral disarmament, there was undoubted concern about the deployment of cruise missiles. There would be great difficulty in securing a wide measure of political support for the deployment unless a dual key control arrangement were secured. Public perception of land-based missiles was different from that of submarines, which would launch their nuclear weapons from out at sea, and of aircraft, which could be recalled before releasing their weapons.

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d. The United States Secretary of State, Mr Shultz, had been told of the state of British public opinion about the dual key question, but no suggestion had so far been made to the United States Administration that the United Kingdom wished to make any change in the arrangements for control: indeed, Ministers had taken a robust line on this subject in public. There would be damaging consequences for the Alliance if the United Kingdom, which had been the most staunchest of all the Allies in support of the deployment of cruise missiles, were to be responsible for re-opening the issue of control, which could be seen only as a lack of confidence in the good faith or good judgement of the United States Administration in time of crisis. If the United Kingdom were seen to find the existing understandings inadequate, the anxieties of the other European Allies on whose territories the system would be deployed would be sharply increased.

e. A dual key arrangement would not only reduce the deterrent value of the cruise missile system, but would also greatly add to the costs to be borne by the United Kingdom, since the United States Administration would be unlikely to agree to a dual key arrangement except on the basis of their original offer in 1979 which would involve the United Kingdom buying and manning the missiles at a cost estimated at about £1,000 million.

f. In the unlikely event that, in a crisis, the President of the United States appeared unwilling to fulfil his obligation to consult the United Kingdom Government it would in the last resort be possible for British personnel at the base to be ordered to take action which would make it virtually impossible for the Americans to launch their weapons.

g. It was of great political importance that the Alliance should maintain the decision taken in December 1979 to deploy cruise missiles and Pershing IIs in Europe. There were also military arguments in favour of the deployment of improved theatre nuclear weapons systems, though these were not as strong as the political arguments.

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THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that care should be taken not to raise the issue of control of cruise missiles in ways that might become public knowledge before the General Election in West Germany. But this need not preclude a discreet approach to the United States Administration to suggest that the procedures for political consultation set out in the 1958 Murphy-Dean Agreement should be revised and updated. The possibility of increasing the British presence at Greenham Common should also be explored, including an increase in the British element of the security force and the training of British personnel to operate the system. Further evidence should also be obtained on public attitudes to control arrangements. In the meantime vigorous efforts should be made to explain and justify the Government's policies. Further consideration of control arrangements, including an examination of the financial terms on which a dual key control system might be obtainable, should await the outcome of the General Election in West Germany. It would however be necessary to explain the extent of public concern to the United States Vice President, Mr Bush, when he visited the United Kingdom in February. Arrangements should be agreed with the Americans to ensure that the main elements of the cruise missile system including the transporter-erector-launchers and the missiles themselves, did not arrive at Greenham Common before the beginning of November, although it was important that there should be no suggestion in public that a proposal had been made to delay the deployment of the system. In practice there would be a period of up to two months after the system had been deployed before it would be fully operational, but this would not be inconsistent with the 1979 NATO decision.

The Meeting -

1. Instructed the Secretary of the Cabinet to approach the United States Administration through the appropriate channel with a view to bringing up to date the provisions of the Murphy-Dean Agreement on procedures for implementing the existing understandings with the United States over the use of nuclear weapons based in the United Kingdom.
2. Invited the Secretary of State for Defence to explore further the possibilities for increasing the British component in the manning and guarding of the cruise missile force.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Defence, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, to propose to the United States Administration that the major elements of the cruise missile equipment should not arrive at Greenham Common before 1 November 1983.

Cabinet Office

28 January 1983

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