CHAPTER III

INDEPENDENT NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

The Early Years

One of the cardinal elements of Britain’s post-War defence policy has been the maintenance of a full range of nuclear weapons exclusively under its command. The story of the evolution of its weapons systems and the underlying policy for their deployment would reveal, on the one hand, Britain’s keenness to maintain a ‘great power status’, in the changed global environment after the War and, on the other, its readiness to stand alone in the world, if the circumstances so warranted. Equally important was her concern to deter yet another global war, which, it was perceived, the destructive potential of the nuclear weapons could lead to.

As a matter of fact, Britain was the first to have realized that a radioactive super-bomb was a scientific possibility. A “Memorandum on the Properties of a Radioactive Super-bomb,” prepared by two British Scientists, O.R. Frisch and R.E. Peierls, in March 1940, gave very strong indications that it was possible to construct such a bomb with an enormous destructive potential in a war. The Memorandum had also cautioned against the dangers if such a weapon was developed by Germany. It, therefore, urged the British government to initiate a project to explore the possibility while, at the same time, keeping a very close watch on Germany to see if any such project was being undertaken by it as part of its war efforts. However, it appears that a Committee, known as The Maud Committee, has already been looking, since 1939, into the feasibility of producing nuclear energy for military purposes for Britain. The Committee’s Report had stated:

... we entered this project with more scepticism than belief though we felt that it was a matter to be investigated. As we proceeded we became more and more

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1 Part II of the Frisch-Peierls Memorandum of March 1940, Reproduced in, J.B. Poole, Independence and Interdependence: A Reader on British Nuclear Weapons Policy (London, Brassey’s, 1990), pp.13-16.
convinced that release of atomic energy on a large scale is possible and that conditions can be chosen which would make it a very powerful weapon of war. ²

This revealed for the first time that the work to investigate the possibilities of utilizing the atomic energy of uranium for military purposes has been in progress for some time. It also reported that the cost involved in making a bomb would be exorbitant. However, the Committee was still of the opinion:

In spite of this very large expenditure, we consider that the destructive effect, both material and moral, is so great that every effort should be made to produce bombs of this kind.... Even if the War should end before the bombs are ready the efforts would not be wasted, except in the unlikely event of complete disarmament, since no nation would care to risk being caught without a weapon of such decisive possibilities.³

However, Britain, already over-stretched in the War-effort, could not afford to divert resources to the tune of an initial investment of more than £5 million (1941 prices) towards a project to produce the bomb. At the same time, since it was convinced of the military value of the bomb, it was not ready to give up either. It was, therefore, agreed, through the Quebec Agreement between the United States and Britain, that the former will make the necessary investment and pursue the project pooling in all available scientific knowledge and manpower of both the countries.

It was agreed between them that the parties to the Agreement would never use nuclear weapons against each other; that they would not use such weapons against other countries without each other’s consent; that they would not pass on information relating to nuclear research to other countries without each other’s consent, and, finally, that in view of the heavy burden of production falling upon the United States, as part of a wise division of the War efforts, the British government agreed to recognize that any post-War advantages of an industrial or commercial character will be dealt with as between the United States and Great Britain on terms to be specified by

the President of the United States to the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Britain expressly disclaimed any interest in the industrial and commercial aspects beyond what may be considered by the President of the United States to be fair and just and in harmony with the economic welfare of the world. This agreement, while taking care of Britain’s immediate military interests, with American resources, disrupted Britain’s own project to develop the first atomic bomb.

Britain’s War-time Prime Minister, Winston S. Churchill, more than anyone else, was aware of the potential effect and future deterrent value of the weapon. Recollecting his role in the momentous decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan in August 1945, he wrote:

There was never a moment’s discussion as to whether the atomic bomb should be used or not. To avert a vast indefinite butchery, to bring the war to end, to give peace to the world, to lay healing hands on its tortured peoples by manifestation of overwhelming power at the cost of a few explosions, seemed, after all our toils and perils, a miracle of deliverance. British consent in principle to the use of the weapon had been given on July 4, before the test had taken place.  

Earlier, during the Hyde Park meeting, between Prime Minister Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in September 1944, also it was agreed that “when the ‘bomb’ is finally available, it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender.”

It was the understanding of its enormous destructive effect in a war and its potential as an effective deterrent that forced the post-War British governments to

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4 The Quebec Agreement, 19 August 1943, was first published in April 1954 as Tube Alloys: Articles of Agreement Governing Collaboration between the Authorities of the USA and the UK in the Matter of Tube Alloys (Atomic Bomb Research and Development), UK,HMSO, Cmd. 9123, reproduced in, J.B. Poole, n.1, pp.17-18 (emphasis added).
5 Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War (London, Cassell, 1954), Vol. VI, p.639; As stated above, it was already agreed between the Prime Minister and the President at the Hyde Park meeting that the bomb could be used against the Japanese to force their final surrender. See, J.B.Poole,n,1, p.20.
6 Aide-memoir of Conversation between the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of United Kingdom at Hyde Park, 19 September 1944. This was an understanding between the US President and the British Prime Minister about which most Americans were unaware. Reproduced in J.B. Poole, n.1,p.20.
decide to have a British hand, on this decisive weapon. The presumed political effects of the possession of the bomb further reinforced British determination to go for it. This determination was best expressed by none other than Churchill himself: “However sceptical one might feel about the assertions of scientists, much disputed among themselves and expressed in jargons incomprehensible to lay man, we could not run the mortal risk of being outstripped in this awful sphere.”

Churchill explained that Britain was essentially concerned with being able to maintain her future independence in the face of international blackmail which the Russians might eventually be able to employ.

Besides the resource crunch, fears of Axis bombing during the War also deterred Britain from attempting to develop the Bomb on the British soil. The intellectual heritage of the War-time project, understanding of the military value and the political weight of the new weapon, together with Britain's political, economic and military predicament, provided the prime motive force behind the post-War British atomic project.

These considerations gave added weight to Churchill's assertions that Britain would pursue the project independently if a satisfactory cooperative arrangement with the United States was not forthcoming. Groom argues that, the rationale for an independent nuclear deterrent was being developed around these considerations: “If the sacrifice necessary in the context had been less or the United States' cooperation not sufficiently forthcoming, then it seems likely that the British would have at least attempted to manufacture an atomic bomb independently.”

Winston Churchill's exposition of the nature and role of the nuclear weapons made as early as the mid-forties and again in the mid-fifties stand as valid today as it was then. Reflecting on the two devastating blows that

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7 W.S. Churchill, n.5, p. 563.
11 Ibid., p. 10.
finally forced Japan to surrender and brought the War to an end in early August 1945, the British official Statement said:

This revelation of the secrets of nature, long mercifully withheld from man, should arouse the most solemn reflection in the mind and conscience of every human being capable of comprehension. We must indeed pray that these awful agencies will be made to conduce to peace among the nations and that instead of wreaking measureless havoc upon the entire globe, they may become a perennial fountain of world prosperity.  

In 1945 many leaders in the British project had believed that Britain's ability to produce fissile material and make and test a bomb would depend on support from the United States in terms of information and some specific material. In any case, Britain was not prepared to see the United States as the sole custodian of the sacred trust. They knew that was too powerful a weapon to be left in the hands of one country or for that matter to be under the control of all. Though the United States was the sole power to possess atomic weapons and the only one endowed with the means to build it, it was evident even at that stage that Britain was not too far from becoming an atomic power. There was a general assumption that Britain would have a bomb before the Soviet Union and thus, by implication a British bomb would have greater politico-military weight.

However, despite all the efforts made by Britain, especially by the new Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, for the restoration of the War-time collaboration with the US, they could not succeed. Further, the passage of the McMahon Act, by the US Congress, in August 1946, transferred the control of the atomic energy department from the military authorities to the civilian Atomic Energy Commission. The Act specifically forbade transmission of all kinds of atomic information to any other country, including Britain. This marked the

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12 This Statement, originally prepared for the use of Prime Minister, Churchill, was actually issued by the new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, on 6 August 1945, as there was a change of government in Britain. This was part of the official reaction to the dropping of the bombs on Japan on 6 August 1945. See, His Majesty's Treasury, *Statement Relating to the Atomic Bomb, 1945*, p.5, Reproduced in, J.B. Poole, n.1.p.22.
13 Margaret Gowing, n.9, p.499.
14 A.J.R Groom, n.10, p.25.
15 Ibid., p. 34-35.
complete breakdown of even the semblance of atomic cooperation between Britain and the United States. Under these circumstances, in January 1947, Prime Minister Attlee decided that Britain should manufacture her own atomic weapons.\textsuperscript{16} Attlee later justified his decision to go nuclear saying: “For a power of our size and with our responsibilities to turn its back on the bomb did not make sense.”\textsuperscript{17} The two main factors in the decision were assumptions about Britain’s great power status, which were shared by almost everyone after the War, including Labour Ministers and the general public, and the claims about strategic necessity put forward by the General Staff.\textsuperscript{18}

Justifying the decision to have Britain’s own Bomb, Clement Attlee said, many years later, that not putting themselves entirely in the hands of the Americans had been the chief concern. He said: “it is all very well to look back and say otherwise, but at that time nobody could be sure that the Americans would not revert to isolationism, many Americans wanted it. Many Americans feared it. There was no NATO then.”\textsuperscript{19} The British government had greatly feared a situation of possible nuclear blackmail by any country and also they believed that the use or threat to use atomic weapons might be essential for the security of Britain itself. Ernest Bevin reacted to the opposition on economic grounds, from within the Cabinet to British nuclear programme, saying:

... we have got to have this ... . I don't mind for myself, but I don't want any other Foreign Secretary of this country to be talked at or by a Secretary of State in the United States as I have just had (sic) in my discussions with Mr. Byrnes. We have got to have this thing over here whatever the costs... . We have got to have the Union Jack flying on top of it.\textsuperscript{20}

In later years when Attlee was asked what was Bevin's greatest contribution as Foreign Secretary he replied: "Standing up to the Americans".\textsuperscript{21} Undoubtedly this

\textsuperscript{17} Kenneth Harris, \textit{Attlee} (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982), p.288.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 352.
\textsuperscript{21} Cited in, Roger Ruston, n.18, p.90.
determination not to lag behind the Americans was a major factor that prevailed on the British in pushing through their own independent atomic bomb project.

Within a few months after seeing the enormous destructive effect of the atomic bomb, Britain had concluded that the best method of defence against atomic bombs was likely to be the deterrent effect of retaliation. As Roger Ruston commented, “the possession, and declared willingness for immediate use, of weapons of mass destruction was to be the basis of Britain’s security” — at least for some time to come.22 A Chiefs of Staff memorandum to the Prime Minister, in January 1946, had indicated it clearly:

We must be prepared for aggressors who have widely dispersed industries and populations. This means that in order to be effective as a deterrent we must have a considerable number of bombs at our disposal. It is not possible now to assess the precise number which we might require, but we are convinced we should aim to have as soon as possible a stock in the order of hundreds rather than scores.23

It was obvious that the reference to “aggressors who have widely dispersed industries and populations” was about the Soviet Union, and, already it was concluded that an atomic weapon was the only possible means of meeting a potential Soviet threat.

Thus it becomes evident here that after all the uncertainty at various stages, and long deliberations about whether to produce atomic weapons or not, the British decision to make an atom bomb had emerged from a body of general assumptions. The decision was not as a response to an immediate military threat but out of a feeling that Britain must possess weapons of such critical nature in order to deter another atomically armed enemy; out of the desire that as a great power, it had to acquire all major new weapons; and out of the realization that atomic weapons were a manifestation of the scientific and technological superiority on which Britain's strength, otherwise deficient, must depend.24 Britain had also conveyed an impression to all

22 Ibid., p.96.
24 Ibid., p.184.
concerned that the decision to produce fissile material in the United Kingdom was non-negotiable in all circumstances.\textsuperscript{25} The terms of reference of the atomic research establishment was "all aspects of the use of atomic energy."\textsuperscript{26} However, right from the beginning, the emphasis was always on the military (deterrent) role of the weapons. The commercial value was not something to be ignored either — "a great industrial nation like Britain was not easily going to ignore the enormous potential for cheap energy that the project offered".\textsuperscript{27}

Politically, the most important factors, however, were to meet the Soviet threat to British interests and to influence American foreign policy. Once the Atlantic Alliance was established, the prime responsibility for meeting the Soviet threat on a global scale fell on the United States. And the assumption by the United States of this very responsibility, in turn, increased the importance of the second principal motive for building a British bomb. As the United States was the leader of the Western Alliance, it became all the more imperative for Britain to be able to exert sufficient influence on it to ensure that vital British interests were safeguarded. By virtue of being an atomic power, the British could, at least, hope to exert such influence by developing close relationship in foreign and defence policies.

It was also perceived that a bomb, under its own ultimate control, would serve as an insurance in an eventuality of the NATO itself ceasing to exist.\textsuperscript{28} Acquisition of the bomb could also disguise the loss of Britain's 'world power status' after the War.\textsuperscript{29} As Roger Ruston rightly observed, "threats to status and threats to security are not easy to disentangle - they appear to engender each other".\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{27} Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.92.
\textsuperscript{28} An MOD Memorandum presented to the House of Commons Expenditure Committee on 9 May 1975, lucidly presents the rationales for the British independent deterrent, See, UK, House of Commons Expenditure Committee, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Report, 1975-76, House of Commons Paper 155, p.14.
\textsuperscript{29} Roger Ruston, n.18, p.92.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.106. Also see, The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Weapons Policy, House of Commons Expenditure Committee, Defence and External Affairs Sub-Committee, 6\textsuperscript{th} Report, 1978-79, House of Commons Paper 348, pp-14-15, para.67 where the Secretary of State for Defence, F.W. Mulley,
British nuclear force was also seen as an insurance policy against any failure on the part of the United States to respond to British needs. Such a force would be a guarantee against nuclear blackmail both against the continent as such and specifically against Britain. It was also perceived at this stage that the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles would, in the long run, enable the United States to dispense with its European bases so that the British force also constituted an insurance against such an eventuality.

Britain’s belief in independent deterrence as an inherent part of first class power status received a major setback in August 1949, when the Russians tested their first nuclear bomb. It was a disturbing development for Britain as it had believed till then that it was ahead of the Russians and closer to the United States in the field of nuclear research. After the Russian bomb explosion, Britain was facing for the first time the implications, not just of a gap in the size of armies and the volume of weapons, but in technological potential also. Britain, therefore, had to provide for alternative arrangements to guard against Russian nuclear blackmail as its own project was yet to produce result, though it was progressing positively.

The immediate British response was to seek the deployment of American nuclear warheads on the British soil as a deterrent against any possible Soviet blackmail of Britain. The supposed security advantages in this arrangement came at the price of making Britain subservient to American strategic interest. Winston Churchill said in the House of Commons on 6 December 1951: “...we must recognize that the step ... [taken by the previous government in allowing the US nuclear bombers’ base facility in East Anglia, UK] places us in the front line, should there be a third World
War. The measure adds to the deterrent against war, but it may throw the brunt on to us should war come."

Winston Churchill’s statement did not imply that, he himself or the Conservative Party was opposed to the deployment of US nuclear bases in Britain, but rather it was meant to drive home the point that the United Kingdom had become more vulnerable to nuclear attack as also to reinforce the case for expediting Britain’s own atomic research programme. These arguments contributed to a new case for an independent nuclear deterrent to a potential Soviet attack on the US bases in Britain. This view, in fact, became one of the main arguments for continuing with the British bomb. The Americans, it was thought, could at some point be unwilling to put their own home land in danger by retaliating for a strike on British territory. This consideration later formed yet another enduring rationale for the British deterrent.

In early 1952, the Chiefs of Staff produced a Global Strategy Paper, which, according to Andrew Pierre, eventually led Britain to become the first nation to base its national security planning almost entirely upon a declaratory policy of nuclear deterrence. The key proposal of the paper was that NATO countries should not try to deploy sufficient conventional forces to stop a Soviet advance, since in the end they could not afford to do so. They should deploy just enough to halt a Soviet advance for a period during which the nuclear counter offensive would make itself felt: the so called tripwire strategy.

Accompanying this was the assertion that there could be no defence against a Soviet atomic attack on Britain. NATO, therefore, was expected to be prepared to reply to any aggression with immediate crushing atomic retaliation. The early American monopoly of the bomb, the regional insecurity, the aggressive nature of the

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35 Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.105.
Soviet policies and its resolve to catch up with the West and the consequent American
policies to contain the Soviet expansionist tendencies, all seemed to have created a
climate of fear among the British military and political circles. The only way out of it
to save the British honour and security was to have a declaratory policy towards
nuclear deterrence.

The Arrival of the Bomb

The committed effort of the British scientists and the political leadership in the
atomic bomb project, which the post-War Labour government had started and pushed
through, finally paid off on 3 October 1952, when, under the Conservative
administration, Britain exploded its first atomic bomb, at Montebello, in Australia. The
explosion was welcomed by the political leadership and the members of the public with
great joy and everyone saw it as a demonstration of Britain’s scientific and technical
competence and as a proof of her status as a great power. That the British were not
feeling comfortable about their dependence on the United States for the nuclear
deterrence was evident in the comments of the Press. Soon after the explosion at
Montebello, The Economist wrote:

...Mr. Churchill should be able to formulate much more convincingly than
hitherto – to the Americans and others – his views on what strategy should be in
the age of atomic artillery and guided missiles... . Many consciences have been
deeply troubled by the thought that American atomic bombs have been the
main deterrent to aggression in the last seven years...

On 23 October 1952, Churchill made a statement, about the British bomb test in
the House of Commons, during which he said that he thought it would lead to a much
closer American interchange of information than had taken place till then. Churchill
explained the rationale for the weapon later, saying that:

These fearful scientific discoveries cast their shadow on every thoughtful mind,
but nevertheless, I believe that we are justified in feeling that there has been a
diminution of tension and the probabilities of another world war have

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39 'A Bomb of One's Own', The Economist (London), 11 October 1952, p.76.
diminished or at least have become more remote.... Indeed I have sometimes the odd thought that the annihilating character of these agencies may bring an utterly unforeseeable security to mankind.\textsuperscript{41}

To Churchill one of the implications of the new weapons was that it would ironically bring about a new kind of rapport between States or, at least, by the weightage of terror, would force them to co-exist peacefully. He added, in 1955: “Then it may well be that we shall by a process of sublime irony, have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival, the twin-brother of annihilation.”\textsuperscript{42} Strategically, Churchill laid great stress on the advent of mutual deterrence. The most important rationale, however, was a political one - that of influence on the United States, and in world affairs. To him possession of a deterrent was a \textit{sine qua non} of such influence and given Churchill's vision of Britain's world role, a British deterrent was essential.\textsuperscript{43} Harold Macmillan, Churchill's Defence Minister, also subscribed to the need to have an independent deterrent, when he said:

... the power to deliver against any aggressor nation an immediate and overwhelming counter-attack [is the most compelling component of deterrence]... Deterrent counter-attack not merely defends Europe from aggression, but the power of interdiction upon invading columns by nuclear weapons gives a new aspect altogether to strategy...\textsuperscript{44}

The main strategic emphasis after the first bomb explosion was on the development of high performance bombers as a means of delivery for the new weapons. By then the focus of Britain’s defence research began to be shifted from conventional weapons to atomic and biological weapons, and defence against them, and the aircraft or rocket to carry atomic weapons.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} For the full text of the speech which formed the evolution of strategic thought and the political \textit{raison d'être} of the British independent deterrent. See, Commons, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, Vol. 537, 1 March 1955, Col. 1894-1905.
\textsuperscript{43} A.J.R. Groom, n. 10, p.106.
\textsuperscript{45} M. Gowing, n. 23, p.175.
The Coming of the Thermo-nuclear Age

However, the United States’ explosion, in November 1952 and of the Soviet explosion in 1953, of the hydrogen bomb (thermo-nuclear devices) immediately after the first British explosion of its atom bomb, considerably diminished the political and military significance of the British bomb and motivated it to go in for its own hydrogen bomb also. Britain had reached the nuclear threshold only to find that there existed yet another weapon of limitless destructive power which it did not have.

On 24 July 1954 the Cabinet Defence Committee, meeting in the context of the successful US hydrogen bomb explosion, felt that considering the nature of Britain’s commitments and stature, it was important for her not to be lagging behind in this field too, so that she could hold her place in the world councils on the issue of peace and war. Subsequently, on 26 July 1954 the Cabinet formally agreed that Britain should make the thermo-nuclear weapons as well. The 1955 Statement on Defence Policy said: “Overshadowing all else in the year 1954 has been the emergence of the thermo-nuclear bomb. This will have far reaching effects on the defence policy of the United Kingdom... We have to prepare against the risk of a world war and so prevent it. It is on the nature of these preparations that the existence of thermo-nuclear weapons has its main effect... The United Kingdom also has the ability to produce such weapons. After fully considering all the implications of this step, the Government have thought it their duty to proceed with their development and production.”

The Statement also reaffirmed the deterrent nature of these nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons. It said:

The use of nuclear weapons is the only means by which this massive preponderance [of Soviet conventional forces] can be countered... If we do not use the full weight of our nuclear power, Europe can hardly be protected from invasion and occupation... We must, therefore, contribute to the deterrent and

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47 Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.108.
49 Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.113.
to our own defence by building up our own stock of nuclear weapons of all types and by developing the most up-to-date means of delivery.\(^{51}\)

Like in the case of the atomic bomb, the British hydrogen bomb was also argued to be necessary because: “...unless we make a contribution of our own... we cannot be sure that in an emergency the resources of other powers would be planned exactly as we would wish or that the target which would threaten us most would be given what we consider the necessary priority in the first few hours.”\(^{52}\) Earlier similar rationale was presented by the Chiefs of Staff for the retention of British independent atomic project. The Chiefs of Staff had claimed that “the knowledge that we possessed weapons of mass destruction and were prepared to use them would be the most effective deterrent to war itself.”\(^{53}\) Deterring war has been a consistent and undiluted commitment for Britain. For this, it was perceived, militarily there was no better way to accomplish this objective than by going nuclear. Michael Stewart put the situation in a very realistic framework when he said: “The idea of a splendid declaration by Britain that she will not touch the accursed thing (the Hydrogen Bomb) has an immense appeal, but it is in fact the most subtle of all the temptations – a shirking of responsibility, disguised as an heroic renunciation.”\(^{54}\)

There was general agreement between the two leading political Parties on the British nuclear and thermo nuclear issues during this period. The Conservatives completed the nuclear weapons and the strategic bomber programmes inherited from the Labour government, and with the latter’s approval they developed it by initiating a thermo-nuclear weapons project and by embarking on important missiles programmes. There was also a general consensus between the Parties on the political rationale for an independent British deterrent. While the reasoning of the Parties was somewhat different – the Conservatives seeking to influence the United States through an independent British force, and a section of the Labour Party seeking independence

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., paras, 22-25 (emphasis added).


\(^{53}\) M Gowing, n. 3, pp. 215 and 441.

\(^{54}\) Michael Stewart, *Policy and Weapons in the Nuclear Age*, Fabian Tract 296, August 1955, p.16.
from the United States through a separate British deterrent — the end result was the same.\textsuperscript{55}

Both the Conservative and the Labour Parties were willing to consider nuclear weapons on political as well as strategic terms, and they agreed that there was both political and military rationale for a British nuclear programme. The political case was strengthened by the onset of a state of mutual deterrence between the Western and the Eastern blocs with its implied dimension of the credibility of the United States guarantee to Europe. Militarily, they were convinced that only a strategic doctrine based on a threat to retaliate against an aggressor using nuclear weapons would effectively deter any potential aggressor.

The 1955 policy statement of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party stated the Party’s position on the thermo-nuclear weapons:

Hitherto, only the United States of America and the USSR have possessed the hydrogen bomb. Labour believes that it is undesirable that Britain should be dependent on another country for this vital weapon. If we were, our influence for peace would be lessened in the councils of the world. It was for that reason that the Labour government decided on the manufacture of the Atom bomb and that we support the production of the hydrogen bomb in this country.\textsuperscript{56}

Denis Healey, a prominent Labour Spokesman on Defence and later its Defence Minister, strongly advocated a declaratory policy based on nuclear deterrence. According to him, it was necessary for the government to take a policy posture that \textit{a full scale global thermo-nuclear war must be the inevitable consequence of aggression in Europe and that conventional forces in Europe would be cut to the bone}.\textsuperscript{57} Healey suggested that British policy should be to use thermo-nuclear weapons when there is a direct and obvious threat to Britain’s national survival. He believed that only such a policy posture would help in effectively halting aggression. It was thus abundantly clear that the Labour Party, in office, was as committed to an independent deterrent

\textsuperscript{55} A.J.R Groom, n. 10, p.115-16.
\textsuperscript{56} Quoted by the Conservative Defence Minister, Duncan Sandys, during the debate on defence in the House of Commons, on 16 April 1957, See, UK, Commons, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, Vol.568, Col.1758.
force as was the Conservatives. However, out of office, the Labour Party, at times appeared uncertain of the course to be adopted.

In the field of thermo-nuclear research also Britain proved successful by the middle of 1957. It exploded its first hydrogen bomb over the Christmas Islands in the Pacific, on 15 May 1957. The testing continued with six further explosions until September 1958, when a moratorium on all nuclear testing was arranged between the superpowers to which Britain also subscribed. This moratorium, in fact, suited Britain. As John Simpson observed: “once having ensured her position in the thermo-nuclear club, it was in Britain’s own interests to bring about international agreements which would inhibit the development by the superpowers of new weapons which could again threaten the effectiveness of her existing weapons and relegate her to an inferior military position.”

Subscribing to the new test-ban treaties actually did not ban the signatory countries from stockpiling of nuclear weapons which countries like Britain needed in order to build a credible deterrent.

Evolving the Operational Doctrines

By the late 1950s Britain already had at its disposal sufficient number of atomic weapons considered necessary for its own perceived role of deterrence, and a credible delivery system, in case the situation so warranted. This capability, with a declared strategy for their definite use, even in the case of a conventional attack, was not something that the potential adversaries could have afforded to take lightly. It was made known to all concerned that ‘immediate and massive use of nuclear weapons’ was to be the inevitable consequence of a conventional attack on Britain by the Soviet bloc.

Since there was considerable tension in the relations between Britain and the Soviet Union on all possible fronts, Britain had reason to be concerned about a possible massive conventional attack by the Soviet military. The only way for Britain to deter this possibility was by harping on the inevitable prospect of a nuclear retaliation.

Hence, throughout the 1950s, the British military and political leadership insisted that Britain meant what it said. Churchill's statement in 1955 that "should war come... there are large number of targets that we and the Americans must be able to strike at once...", gave more evidence to Britain's policy of reliance on nuclear weapons. By this announcement Churchill was, only subscribing to the then prevailing American doctrine of Massive Retaliation. The 1956 Statement on Defence had stated the British position that the "objective of Western powers is defensive. They will never be the aggressors but they must have and be known to have the power of instant and overwhelming retaliation if attacked."

Earlier, in 1954 two top ranking British military officers had stated the position quite unambiguously. In February 1954, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, John Slessor, wrote: "A world war in this day and age would be general suicide and the end of civilization as we know it... and the reason for that is that if there were another world shooting war, the atom and the hydrogen bomb would be used, beyond any shadow of doubt... It is these things that have made total war an obsolete conception." Again, in November 1954, Field Marshal, Viscount Montgomery, candidly explained, through an article in a journal, what NATO's nuclear weapons were for:

...a world hot war would result in their (enemy's) own destruction: no matter how great the surprise they achieved at the outset nor how ruthlessly they conducted the contest. ...we at S.H.A.P.E. are basing all our planning on using atomic and thermo-nuclear weapons in our defence. With us it is no longer "They may possibly be used", it is very definitely, "they will be used, if we are attacked." The reason for this action is that we cannot match the strength that could be brought against us unless we use nuclear weapons.

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59 UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 537, 1 March 1955, Col. 1895.
60 Massive Retaliation was the name for a declaratory strategy by which if war broke out with the Soviet Union, NATO would rely on immediate and massive use of American nuclear fire power in order to counteract the presumed disproportionately large Soviet advantage in conventional weapons. See, Beatrice Heuser, NATO, Britain, France And The FRG: Nuclear Strategies And Forces For Europe, 1949-2000 (London, Macmillan, 1997), pp.33-38.
61 UK, HMSO, Statement on Defence 1956, Cmd. 9691.
Reliance on cheap explosive power became central to NATO plans from the mid-1950s ever since the United States introduced the tactical nuclear weapons in the shape of artillery and short-range rockets. Britain had a major role in shaping this policy. While laying emphasis on a policy based on *Massive Retaliation*, the objective in the minds of British strategists was the avoidance of war of all kinds. This consideration clearly echoed in the 1957 Statement on Defence: “Since there is no means of providing adequate protection against the consequences of a nuclear attack it is clear that the *overriding consideration in all military planning must be to prevent war rather than to prepare for it*... It is unhappily true that the *only existing safeguard against major aggression is the power to threaten retaliation with nuclear weapons*.”

In presenting the 1957 White Paper, the Defence Minister Duncan Sandys, had argued that it is not enough to be able to feel contented with the American nuclear protection for Europe, especially after the Russians and the Americans had developed their 500 mile Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), thereby making them mutually vulnerable to direct attack. He argued that Britain should prepare herself for an eventuality of any future American Administration refusing to come to the aid of Europe.

Ever since it developed its own range of credible nuclear weapons, Britain has relied for its defence, primarily upon the deterrent effect of its vast stockpile of atomic and the thermo-nuclear arsenals, supplemented by the American strategic nuclear weapons, with less emphasis on the Alliance’s conventional strength. The 1958 Defence White Paper declared in unequivocal terms:

...the democratic Western nations will never start a war against Russia. But it must be well understood that if Russia were to launch a major attack on them, even with conventional forces only, they would have to hit back with strategic nuclear weapons. In fact the strategy of NATO is based on the frank recognition that a full scale Soviet conventional attack could not be repelled without resort to a massive nuclear bombardment of the sources of power in Russia. In that event the role of the Allied Defence forces in Europe would be to hold the front...

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for the time needed to allow the effects of the nuclear counter offensive to make themselves felt.66

Later, addressing a Conservative Party meeting Sandys repeated this British concern:

A global war... would be a catastrophe beyond imagination. Therefore... the first essential in our defence policy must be to do everything in our power to prevent that thing from happening ... .Whatever other economies might be necessary Britain must make her own British contribution to the nuclear deterrent... . It is sometimes suggested that we might have left all this to the Americans, but... it would not be right to make ourselves wholly dependent upon another country, however friendly, for this most vital element in modern defence... . Our neighbours in Europe feel the safer for knowing that in all circumstances there will remain an element of nuclear deterrent power this side of the Atlantic.67

Thus the deterrent was not only an insurance against a decline in the United States' credibility, but against a possible dilution of their political steadfastness to defend Europe in any given situation. By formally adding this European identity element, Britain was clearly articulating one of its original considerations for an independent nuclear deterrence in the European strategic context. This had both political and military significance. Britain now made it clear that it was not taking the American commitment to Europe for granted, and that it was ready to face an eventuality of having to manage without their Commitments.

Sandys also suggested that it was necessary to develop improved tactical weapons (Theater Nuclear Weapons) “to deal with a situation short of global war by means less terrible than wholesale retaliation.” Like Churchill, Duncan Sandys also believed that it was the existence of the ultimate deterrent, the nuclear bombs, that constituted the major stabilizing factor in the world.68 In Sandy's Statement one can also discern a desire for a change in strategy from massive retaliation to an alternative strategy of graduated deterrence. Some strategists, by the late fifties, had begun to see massive retaliation as too drastic and inflexible to obtain the objectives of defence policy. Rear Admiral Anthony Buzzard, suggested that the focus of British defence

67 Address at the National Union of Conservatives and Unionists Associations, 77th Annual Conference, Brighton 10-12 October 1957, p. 49.
68 UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 577, 7 November, 1957, Col. 338 (emphasis added).
policy must be to secure the objectives: (1) to prevent war of all kinds; (2) to ensure that the hydrogen bomb is never used; (3) to strengthen the West’s hand in negotiations and in blocking Communist expansionism and power politics around the globe, to pave the way for nuclear disarmament; and 4) meanwhile to bring about and exploit any conventional disarmament that is practicable.  

Buzzard wanted Britain to establish a clear distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons, so that she could use her atomic weapons tactically without provoking the strategic use of hydrogen weapons. He, therefore, proposed that Britain should be able to choose from three graduated courses of action — from conventional to tactical and from tactical to the strategic — i.e., after modifying their then existing inflexible policy of massive retaliation to one of graduated deterrence. In graduated deterrence the initial emphasis was to be on using tactical nuclear weapons against military targets, and if it failed to yield the desired result, resort was to be made to strategic weapons against the centres of population.

The government, however, finally rejected the case for adopting graduated deterrence stating that it would not be a practicable policy for any government to define precisely in advance the circumstances in which it would use some weapons and not others. It did not want to do anything that could increase the risk of another war. The 1958 White Paper also had laid stress on the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. It said: “There is thus no military reason why a world conflagration should not be prevented for another generation or more through the balancing fears of mutual annihilation. In fact there is no reason why all this should not go on almost indefinitely.” This, echoed

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70 Ibid., p.149.
71 See the Statement of the Minister for Defence, Walter Monckton, in the House of Commons, on 28 February 1958, UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, 28 February 1958, Col.1035.
Churchill’s statement of 1953 that the “annihilating character of these agencies may bring an utterly unforeseeable security to mankind.”

The 1958 Statement on Defence was partially based on the assumption that the Western powers, especially the United States had an edge over the Soviet Union in the nuclear and the thermo-nuclear field. The British themselves had by then a considerable share of atomic weapons and a credible delivery system. This itself was not something that the Soviet leaders could have ignored. Hence even in the wake of the British humiliation on Suez the government’s emphasis was on nuclear deterrence rather than on beefing up its conventional forces, even though it was the weakness on the conventional front that contributed to the failure to produce a quick result in the conflict.

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made it very clear in 1958 that it was necessary for Britain to rely on a declaratory strategy of an early use of nuclear weapons in a large scale conflict with the Soviet Union as part of its policy of deterrence. He declared: “It is not merely the crossing of the frontier which would entail the use of nuclear weapons. But if there are 200 Divisions (Soviet) marching across Europe, if London is being bombed by ordinary bombers, if the whole great battle has begun we would retort with the bomb.”

With a viable deterrent already in place, and having conceded the Soviet superiority in the conventional sphere, the only way in which British people could be assured of a reasonable sense of security was by projecting a posture of readiness and willingness to bring to bear the unacceptable nuclear strength on any potential aggressor. The Prime Minister’s statement sought to convey that any kind of adventure against Britain would invite unacceptable damage.

At the heart of the British strategic doctrine during this period was the threat to retaliate against any aggressor using both strategic and theatre nuclear weapons.

74 The Daily Telegraph, (London), reporting Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s Television’s Interview, 24 February 1958.
Though the Defence Statements of 1960, 1961 and 1962 had recognized the visible gap in the conventional strength and the consequent need to fill that gap, no serious effort was made by the government in bridging them. The emphasis still was on the nuclear deterrence. First and early use of nuclear weapons remained at the centre of British and NATO action policy despite all the studies which had shown the immense destruction it would cause to Europeans on both sides of the border if tactical nuclear weapons were used in a battle. Britain also quite successfully projected that any military adventure by the Soviet Union in the NATO area would risk bringing down American strategic weapons also on the Soviet cities. Conventional armies were to be nothing but trip-wires ensuring an early entry of American tactical nuclear weapons into conflict which in turn would provide the essential linkage with the strategic weapons.

Providing for the Delivery Systems

By late 1950s, the British strategists had realized that it cannot rely on the Bombers to penetrate the Soviet defences and to launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet territories. The launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 came as a shock to the entire Western world as it revealed for the first time the extent of advances that their 'global adversary' had made in the delivery system for all kinds of mass destruction weapons. This, more than anything else, pointed to the increasing vulnerability of the United States to a Soviet nuclear attack, directly from the latter's territory.

Though the United States had the capability to hit back using their weapons already deployed in the European-NATO areas, the fact that the range of Russian firepower was ahead of the Americans demoralized both the West Europeans and the Americans equally. For Britain it meant an economic and military blow as it found that the delivery system it was planning to rely on, the V-Bomber force (the V. bombers, the Vulcan, Valiant and the Victor), was beginning to be obsolete almost as

76 Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.139.
soon as it became fully operational forcing it to make further investments for the
development of its own long range delivery system, the *Blue Streak* missiles, to carry
the strategic nuclear warheads.\(^77\) Soon, however, the realization that land-based fixed
rockets had the inherent risk of being targeted for pre-emptive strikes by the Soviet
missiles, thereby exposing 'centers of population' to avoidable risks, made the
Conservative government to cancel the *Blue Streak* programme as well.\(^78\) By 1960
Britain was convinced that it could not hope to keep an independent place in the missile
race. Macmillan justified the cancellation of the *Blue Streak*, saying: “This is a very
small country and to put these installations [fixed rockets] near the large centres of
populations – where they have to be – would cause increasing anxiety [to the people].
A bomber is somehow accepted on its bombing field; and a mobile weapon either on a
truck or better still in a submarine, is out of sight...”\(^79\)

A well defined and seemingly effective strategy in itself could not have ensured
the defence of the British homeland. It had to be, necessarily, backed by an effective
military mechanism. Russians, already having made rapid strides in its nuclear
weapons technology, Britain came to realize, by early 1960s, that there existed a gap
between its professed deterrent strategy and its capability to implement that strategy.
Many European governments felt that the strategic balance was tilted in favour of
Russia. This situation was perceived to be counter-productive for deterrence. Britain,
therefore, sought to strengthen its own and NATO’s nuclear deterrent force.\(^80\) To begin
with, it could only think of seeking increased American commitments.

The immediate solution to the Soviet advances in the missile technology,
pending Western advances in this field, was to seek the deployment of American *Thor*
and *Jupiter* ballistic missiles on British territory targeted towards the Warsaw Pact, as
part of the NATO strategy, and later to buy the air-launched *Skybolt* ballistic missiles
and the *Polaris* from the United States as the carrier for the British strategic weapons

\(^77\) Roger Ruston, n.18, p.139.
\(^79\) Ibid.
\(^80\) AJR, Groom, "The British Deterrent", in John Baylis, ed. *British Defence Policy in a Changing World*
and thereby for filling the gap in the British delivery system. The selection of Skybolts could prolong the life of the V-Bombers,\textsuperscript{81} which was becoming obsolete in the face of the Soviet Sputnik. As per the agreement for deploying the Thor, between Prime Minister Macmillan and President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United Kingdom was to provide the sites and supporting facilities required for their deployment and their actual use was to be a matter of joint decision by both the governments. However, the nuclear warheads for these missiles was to remain in full US "ownership, custody and control in accordance with the US law."\textsuperscript{82}

This had invited severe criticisms from several quarters. The \textit{New Statesman} described the agreement as "Britain's suicide pact."\textsuperscript{83} According to it "the missile agreement is one of the most extraordinary and complete surrenders of sovereignty ever made by one country for the exclusive benefit of another."\textsuperscript{84} The Opposition Labour Party was also critical of the fact that such an agreement was entered into without repealing the McMahon Act which had specifically prohibited sharing of nuclear information with any country, including Britain.\textsuperscript{85}

This Agreement, to station these missiles, however, marked the beginning of a series of agreements for cooperation between the UK and the US governments in the nuclear field. The most remarkable development was the much awaited amendment, in July 1958, of the McMahon Act of 1946, which had literally sabotaged the prospect of post-War nuclear collaboration between the United States and the United Kingdom. Ever since the Act was passed Britain had hoped that sooner or later it will be repealed paving the way, once again, for effective cooperation between the two countries.

\textit{As per the new 'Agreement... for cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes,'} each Party could communicate to or exchange with the

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. For details of the Agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom see, UK, HMSO, \textit{Supply of Missiles by the United States to the United Kingdom}, Cmnd. 366, 22 February 1958.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{The New Statesman}, 4 January, 1958, p.1.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} UK, Commons, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, 24 February 1958, Col. 29-32.
other Party, among other things, such classified information as is jointly determined to be necessary for:

1) the development of defence plans;

2) the training of personnel in the employment of and defence against atomic weapons and other military applications of atomic energy;

3) the evaluation of the capabilities of potential enemies in the employment of atomic weapons and other military applications of atomic energy;

4) the development of delivery systems compatible with the atomic weapons which they carry; and

5) research, development and design of military reactors to the extent and by such means as may be agreed. 86

Britain could not have asked for more at a time when it needed such cooperation the most. This was followed by the agreement to station the American Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station (BMEW) in the United Kingdom, 87 and the understanding between the US and the UK governments for the supply of the Skybolt missiles to Britain. This deal for the much needed delivery system for UK was followed by the agreement to provide ‘sheltered anchorage facility’ to the American Polaris missile-firing submarines at Holy Loch in Scotland, concluded in 1960. According to Andrew Pierre, the controversial agreement to allow this base facility to the Polaris fleet was a quid-pro-quo deal for obtaining the Skybolt. 88

However, the abrupt cancellation of the Skybolt, on technical and financial grounds by the United States, in November 1962, 89 once again placed Britain in an uncomfortable position without a reliable alternative delivery system to give credibility

87 The BMEW system was a long-range radar and telecommunications network designed to give warning of a Soviet attack by the northern route. It comprises three stations, the other two being in Alaska and Greenland, all linked to the North American air-defence system (NORAD) For details of the terms of the Memorandum, see, UK, HMSO, Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station in the United Kingdom, Cmd. 946, February 1960.
89 The Times (London), 14 December 1962.
and to sustain its independent nuclear deterrent. As Dillon commented, the
disappointments of the *Blue Streak* were compounded by those of the *Skybolt*.\(^9\) At this
stage though her nuclear weapons capability was not in doubt, British ability to fire
them to the targets was questionable. Britain, therefore, was desperate to fill this
crucial gap in her capability.

Even though the cancellation had actually contributed to the eruption of “a
wave of anti-Americanism in the British public and at the official level”, appealing to
the goodwill of the United States was the only practical way out for the British.\(^9\)
Prime Minister Macmillan believed that there was an implied understanding during
the negotiations for the *Skybolt* that in an eventuality of it not being successful, the
United States would consider supplying the *Polaris* to Britain.\(^2\)

It, however, took a very hard bargain for the British to convince the United
States before an agreement was reached between Prime Minister Macmillan and the
US President, John F. Kennedy, at their meeting in Nassau, between 18 and 21
December 1962, to make available America’s most modern missile system, the *Polaris*
to the United Kingdom, as “part of a NATO nuclear force and targeted in accordance
with NATO plans.”\(^3\) According to the Communiqué, issued after the meeting, the
Prime Minister made it clear that “except where Her Majesty’s Government may decide
that supreme national interests are at stake, these British forces will be used for the
purposes of international defence of the Western Alliance in all circumstances.”\(^4\)

The eventual agreement, signed on 6 April 1963 in Washington, was seen as a
major achievement of the Conservative Government in Britain.\(^5\) Till the deal was
finalized Britain had a nagging suspicion that the United States might use this
opportunity to get Britain out of the nuclear club, a scenario Macmillan feared the most

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\(^9\) G.M. Dillon, n. 81, p.24.
\(^9\) Andrew Pierre, n.36, p.224; *The Sunday Times* (London), 8 December 1962, reported that the incident
‘nearly split the West’.
1962, para.6.
\(^4\) Ibid., para.9.
for Britain as well as for him personally. It was also a test-case for the otherwise waning Anglo-American special relationship in those days. On the one hand, it demonstrated that to the extent common security interests were identified, the United States was willing to go along with the British and, on the other, that the special relationship was not to be taken for granted. The final deal, however, was seen as a generous one from the British point of view. Strategically, not only did it help Britain to sustain the credibility of her deterrent force, but also to strengthen it with the induction of the submarine-based 'invisible and invulnerable' delivery system, the best it could aspire for. In the process, however, seen in retrospect, Britain became increasingly dependent upon the United States for her strategic nuclear deterrence.

The Conservatives left office in October 1964, confident that the deterrent was in place though many doubted the extent of 'independence' that it was left with. Britain's fast declining economy could not afford to sustain the investment necessary for keeping pace with the technological advancement taking place elsewhere. The inevitable consequence was the growing dependence on the United States for various kinds of support, particularly for the delivery system, radar communications, guidance and targeting and the nuclear submarine as the safe carrier for the strategic deterrent.

Nevertheless, the deterrent remained as a factor to be reckoned with by the identified enemy, consistently reinforcing all the rationale put forward for their maintenance, from the very inception of the nuclear programme. Other finer details, like the degree of independence, were something mostly for domestic political debate.
and to be settled between two best of friends among nations, as and when the need arose. This feeling of reassurance was reflected in the Conservative Government's last Defence Policy Statement before they gave way to the Labour in 1964:

...if there were no power in Europe capable of inflicting unacceptable damage on a potential enemy he might be tempted ... to attack in the mistaken belief that the United States would not act unless America herself were attacked. The V-Bombers by themselves are, and the Polaris submarine will be, capable of inflicting greater damage than any potential aggressor would consider acceptable. For this reason British nuclear forces make a unique contribution to the main deterrent.

Thus, when the Labour took over in October 1964, Britain still had a credible nuclear deterrent in place. In the few years preceding the 1964 General Election, the Labour Party had gone through long-drawn debate about the need for Britain to remain a nuclear power and on the continued relevance of NATO for it. A sizeable section within the Party, organized around Harold Wilson, was opposed to the idea of a 'nuclear Britain', to the Polaris deal as also to the idea of the US bases in Holy Loch. Though this group was in a minority within the Party, ironically, (due to the sudden demise of the majority leader, Hugh Gaitskel), its leader, Wilson, led the Labour Party to victory in the 1964 election and formed the government. Going by the rhetoric of this group during the elections, it was expected that the new government will take Britain out of the 'nuclear club'.

Once in office, however, the leadership was not prepared to gamble with the nation's security. After about a month in office, the Cabinet decided to continue with the Polaris. According to Wilson, there was no argument at all in the Cabinet on the issue. The government felt that, in terms of investment, the project was "well past the point of no return" and that it could not have been cancelled, "except at inordinate cost." As Lawrence Freedman commented, cost-effectiveness must have particularly impressed Denis Healey. On becoming the Defence Secretary, Healey was given the target of

100 UK, HMSO, Statement on Defence, 1964, Cmnd. 2270, para. 7.
102 Ibid.
making an annual saving in defence expenditure to the tune of £400m at 1964 prices over the following five years. Since this was expected to be done without adversely affecting the national security, financial considerations would definitely have influenced the defence policy planning. Healey had other considerations too – the political element appeared to be even stronger. As he put it later:

One reason why I decided we should after all keep Polaris was that there was little chance of influencing McNamara’s [American Secretary of State for Defence] nuclear strategy if we had renounced nuclear weapons ourselves; he opposed smaller countries having nuclear weapons essentially because he wanted to centralize all nuclear decisions in Washington. I did not think it was wise to entrust the future of the human race to the mathematicians in the Pentagon, who seemed to assume human characteristics only when they thought their institutional interests were at stake.

By 1965, the British government had come to the conclusion that a war in Europe in the near future was unlikely, as everyone was keen to avoid a nuclear confrontation. A matter that required the immediate attention of NATO, at this point of time, according to Britain, was that of nuclear proliferation which increased the risk of a nuclear war, perhaps by default. Unchecked proliferation was thought to be providing inducement for non-nuclear NATO members, like West Germany, to aspire to acquire nuclear weapons.

The 1966 Statement on the Defence Estimate, therefore, sought to address this concern and proposed various measures to satisfy the non-nuclear members. It included an assurance to all the member countries that “in a crisis nuclear weapons will – or will not – be used (only) in accordance with the needs of the alliance as a whole.” The proposals included the formation of an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) in which the non-nuclear powers of NATO would have some collective authority over the planning and deployment of nuclear weapons in the European area. With this objective in view, nuclear powers were advised to share some of the nuclear planning

105 Ibid., p.307(emphasis added).
107 Roger Ruston, n.18, p.166.
responsibilities with the non-nuclear NATO countries, including West Germany, through the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), established in 1967.\textsuperscript{108}

\textbf{Emergence of Flexible Response}

The 1966 Statement on the Defence Estimates also suggested that it was important not to overlook the role of conventional defence so that smaller conflicts could be contained without letting to escalate into an all out nuclear war.\textsuperscript{109} A new strategic doctrine, called 'flexible response', cherished by Healey for a long time, was beginning to evolve here. \textit{Flexible Response} was a strategic option conceived by the American Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, in 1962, as a means of giving a US President other options in Europe than immediately ordering the use of nuclear weapons. The initial proposal of McNamara meant raising the nuclear threshold by “planning for the critical responses to Soviet aggression to be made by conventional forces alone.”\textsuperscript{110}

This would have involved improving the conventional defences of the European NATO members, involving heavy investment, a prospect they have been resisting ever since the end of the War. The European NATO members also saw in the proposal a hidden possibility of decoupling the United States from the defence of Europe – yet another dreaded prospect then for the Europeans. Essentially, none of the European members of NATO wanted to make Europe safe for a conventional war either. For them NATO would have been worthless unless it could prevent another war, they were not interested in fighting one.\textsuperscript{111}

The ambiguity and uncertainty about the nature and content of the new doctrine to be adopted continued for almost five years before the North Atlantic Council decided to formally replace \textit{Massive Retaliation(MR)} with \textit{Flexible Response (FR)}. In a

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{109} Cmd.2901, n.106, p.6.
\textsuperscript{111} Denis Healey, n. 104, p.308.
nutshell, FR involved initiating resistance to an aggression with conventional weapons and then proceeding to rely on a ladder of nuclear escalation, moving steadily further up the ladder as necessary, depending on the nature and extent of the aggression to be resisted, with a full scale strategic nuclear exchange as the ultimate sanction. At the heart of the FR doctrine was the resolve not to accept defeat, even if it warranted the use of strategic nuclear weapons against the aggressor.¹¹²

One of the objectives of the doctrine of FR was to convey to the Soviet leadership that they could not hope to gain a quick or easy victory even in a conventional war. NATO wanted to convince the Warsaw Pact that “it has at its disposal a range of defensive options that would enable it to respond to any attack at an appropriate level and that any gains which Soviet aggression might be designed to achieve would be outweighed by the damage which could be inflicted on them.”¹¹³ The main advantage seen in this was that it does not commit NATO to respond to an attack in a pre-ordained way. If the fundamental purpose of preventing war failed, the Alliance’s objective would be to stop the conflict at the lowest possible level.¹¹⁴

Denis Healey, the Defence Secretary, who had found merit in the earlier proposal of graduated deterrence was only too happy to accept the new doctrine which was quite close to the former one. According to him, it was important for NATO to have an appropriate response that would match the nature of aggression rather than opting for a hasty resort to the nuclear weapons — the so called, trip-wire strategy — which was inherently suicidal.¹¹⁵ Flexible Response, therefore, was accepted to be an effective strategy to deal with the perceived threat from the Soviet Bloc.


¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ For Healey’s defence of the FR strategy, see, UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Vol.779, 4 March 1969, Col.238.
The *Polaris* Improvement Programme.

By the late 1960s, in spite of the serious economic difficulties Britain was facing, the Labour government felt confident about their achievements on the defence front. In *Polaris* a formidable delivery system was already in place. In FR, a seemingly appropriate operational doctrine too was evolved. The FR’s requirements of having to enhance the conventional force for Europe was met by effecting substantial withdrawals from areas East of Suez and redeploying them in the NATO areas.

Though the East of Suez decision was severely criticized by the Conservatives, the government was convinced that its decision will contribute towards enhancing Britain’s security in Europe, where it actually mattered the most. And, in spite of Czechoslovakia, Britain felt that the Soviet intentions outside their own sphere of influence was largely peaceful. Denis Healey’s statement in the House of Commons, while defending the FR strategy read: “We must not assume that we are dealing at all times with an enemy who has an absolute will to destroy us and an infinite capacity for calculating the military means to that end... Our political adversaries are usually ordinary men subject to ordinary temptations, and often facing predicaments from which they may be as anxious to escape as we are.”\(^{116}\) That reflected the new understanding. The ongoing negotiations for arms control and détente between East and West was another hopeful sign.

However, these hopes were soon belied by the Western discovery that the Warsaw Pact had further strengthened their conventional defences and had made rapid strides in developing defences against the ballistic missiles. The developments on the Anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs) front once again made Britain to feel uneasy about her own defences. ABMs, deployed around Moscow, virtually undermined one of the core elements of nuclear targeting by Britain and the rest of NATO, ie, at ‘the centers of power in Moscow,’ what is otherwise known as the *Moscow Criterion*. The Conservative government that returned in the 1970 elections, under the leadership of

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
Edward Heath, felt that those ABMs made her nuclear deterrence less effective. The only way out was to seek further improvement to the Polaris, by developing systems that could penetrate the ABMs and still hit the first target. Accordingly a decision was taken to explore the possibility of arranging an alternative to Polaris. Initially, as usual, the attempt was to obtain the Poseidon with its multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRV) technology. However, prior to this, in 1967, the Labour government, as part of its routine technology up-gradation exercise, had asked the nuclear weapons research establishment, at Aldermaston, to consider improvements to the Polaris in order to ensure its viability into the 1980s. 117

Encouraged by the preliminary studies, and being increasingly sceptical about the penetrability of the Polaris against the Soviet ABMs, a feasibility study for developing an alternative to Polaris was authorized. 118 These studies indicated that developing Britain's own system could be much cheaper than purchasing the American Poseidons. Many in the British government also felt that Britain would have found it quite difficult to obtain the Poseidons from the United States. 119 Finally, the government gave the green signal for full-fledged research into the programme in 1974. The project was code-named Chevaline. By the mid 1970s, when the new Labour government, the third under Harold Wilson, reviewed the programme, it had appeared to be progressing very well, with some American involvement. However, for various reasons, this project remained a half-hearted one from its inception, and ultimately failed in delivering the system that was required, even after nearly ten years of work and after investing over £1000m. 120

It had to encounter serious difficulties all along the process of attempting to develop it. Lack of political will and support, improper cost estimate, irregular

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117 G.M. Dillon, n.81, p.109.
118 Lawrence Freedman, n.103, p.47.
119 According to Sir Frank Cooper, Permanent Under Secretary in the Ministry of Defence (MOD), "it is a myth that we could have got Poseidon easily and comfortably in the mid-1970s. See, Dillon, n.81, p.111.
funding, insufficient management support came in the way of the project. By the time when the government felt that a replacement was inevitable, due to the seemingly alarming developments on the European security front caused by the Soviet deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles targeted towards Western Europe, it was felt that it made better military sense to opt for the latest Trident missiles from the United States, rather than waiting for the uncertain result of the British programme. Therefore, Britain shifted its focus towards obtaining the Trident missile systems and virtually abandoned her own search for an independent new generation delivery system for her strategic weapons.

Though abandoned midway, progress made over the ten-year period with the Chevaline was quite encouraging on the ground. Britain could gain some new insights into some of the crucial areas like penetrating the ABM systems, maneuverability of the missiles in space; etc. It also conveyed the degree of political convergence between the Labour and the Conservative Parties on the nuclear programme. The project stayed through the governments of both the Parties for over ten years. More than anything else, even though, ultimately it did not help much in adding to the strategic systems materially, as in the case of the early years of the nuclear weapons project, the Chevaline programme, did help in conveying to the Americans that Britain was capable and willing to pursue her strategic interests independently, if need arose. This came handy in negotiating with the Americans for the Trident.

Replacement of the Polaris

By the late 1970s, the United States had withdrawn most of her Polaris missiles from service and the British experts had come to the conclusion that their own Polaris would outlive their purpose by the early 1990s. Once the United States had completely phased out her Polaris, Britain would have found it difficult to sustain hers as the system was heavily dependent on the US supply of spares and for other

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121 Dillon, n.81, 113-120.
technical assistance. Also, since the Polaris-carrying submarines were due for replacement, naturally it made better sense to refit the new submarines with a new and more effective delivery system that would match it technologically as also for its life-span.

The Labour government, under James Callaghan, constituted a secret Ministerial Committee of senior Cabinet Ministers, in early 1979, to explore the need and possibilities of replacement for the Polaris. This Committee advised the Prime Minister to explore the possibility of a replacement for the Polaris with the US President Jimmy Carter, during their proposed meeting in early 1979. The final decision to purchase the Trident was eventually made under the new Conservative Government that assumed power in May 1979, under Margaret Thatcher. However, the work done by the Labour’s ministerial Committee was useful in providing the lead for the new government to proceed faster with the decision to replace the Polaris.

Mrs. Thatcher had assumed the Prime Ministership in May 1979, “unencumbered by the Labour Party’s enfeebling, and by now traditional, moral and practical dilemmas over nuclear weapons” and with a conviction that the Communist bloc needed to be dealt with very firmly. Between 10 and 14 July 1980, Prime Minister Thatcher and President Jimmy Carter exchanged letters confirming the sale of the latest American missile system, the Trident to Britain. Thatcher’s request was for the “Trident-I missiles, equipment and supporting services” to be supplied in a manner generally similar to that in which the Polaris was supplied. President Carter’s reply was positive. He stated that the United States attached significant importance to the nuclear deterrent capability of the UK and to close cooperation between the two

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125 Ibid.
126 G.M. Dillon, n.81, p.138.
governments in maintaining and modernising that capability. Therefore, “to further that objective” the President offered to supply the Trident-I missiles to the UK.

Obtaining Trident was found to be much easier than the Polaris. The crisis in détente as seen through the developments in Afghanistan, the political and strategic setbacks the West experienced by the fall of the Shah of Iran, and the signs of increasing diplomatic, political and military offensive by the Soviet Union in different parts of the world in the late 1970s, have all contributed towards the ease with which the United Kingdom managed to obtain the most sophisticated missile system in the world from the USA. In Trident Britain found the most modern and reliable delivery system for her strategic nuclear warheads, ensuring continuity with the one to be replaced, capable of penetrating the Soviet ABMs, surviving a first strike by the Soviet Union and at the same time retaining the same level of operational independence that the Polaris had provided. According to Dillon, the Trident satisfied both the government’s deterrent criteria and its programmatic criteria inasmuch as it was the latest in SLBM technology and had just entered service with the US Navy.

In terms of cost also Britain found it to be the best that she could buy. The major defence review initiated in 1981 emphasized this point: “Review of all the options confirms that Trident remains by far the best way – indeed the only cost-effective way – of modernizing the crucial strategic element of our capability. In the government’s firm judgment, no alternative application of defence resources could approach this in real

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128 Ibid., p.3
129 Ibid. (President Carter’s Reply to Thatcher’s request).
131 G.M. Dillon, n.81, p.147.
deterrent insurance.” Later in, 1982, the Defence Secretary, John Nott, stated: “…for 3 per cent of the defence budget we retain a second strike capability should anybody ever attempt to strike us first.” This concern for ensuring ‘cost-effective deterrence’ has been one of the major preoccupations of defence policy-makers since late the 1950s.

Former British Defence Secretary and Former Secretary General of NATO, Lord Carrington, claimed that Britain needed the Trident for various reasons and for the job it is expected to do it is quite cheap. The 1985 Defence White Paper also acknowledged this when it said: “It is our firm belief that no alternative use of British resources would provide anywhere near such a strengthening of collective Alliance deterrence to aggression…” In the case of Trident, both in terms of the investment required and for its assessed long life, it was judged giving the best value for money, with the minimum of political effort to obtain it from the United States.

It was this second advantage that stands out prominently in the Trident story for Britain. Whereas Britain had to do a lot of bargaining with the United States to make her agree to supply the Polaris in the early 1960s, the Trident deal was finalized with minimum effort. This ease was even more marked when it came to acquiring the more advanced version of the Trident-I, the Trident-II D5, within two years of the agreement to buy the former. Already, when the Trident-I deal was being negotiated there were indications that a more advanced version of it could be available in the near future. However, the technology for it was not yet perfected. Since Britain was keen to obtain a replacement for the ageing Polaris, it did not want to wait for an uncertain technical venture and went ahead with the deal for the Trident-I.

134 House of Commons Defence Committee, 1st Special Report 1981-82, Strategic Nuclear Weapons Policy, House of Commons Paper 266, p.21 (extracts from the oral evidence given by the Secretary of State for Defence, John Nott).
135 See Lord Carrington’s views on Britain’s independent deterrent expressed in a Question-answer format in, Oliver Ramsbotham, Choices: Nuclear and Non-nuclear Defence Options (London, Brassey’s 1987), p.165.
137 GM. Dillon, n.81, p.137-140.
When the US President, Ronald Reagan announced his decision to accelerate the new strategic nuclear weapons development programme and advance the schedule for the deployment of the Trident-II D5 for the US Navy, Britain was also benefited immensely from it. The already discovered commonality in the attitudes and approaches of the British Prime Minister and the US President, both in the domestic and the foreign policy arenas, made the task of upgrading the British choice to the more advanced Trident-II D5 only a matter of formality. This time again, Prime Minister’s letter to the President stressed the need to supply the “Trident-II D5 missiles, equipment and supporting services on a continuing basis and in a manner generally similar to that in which Polaris was supplied.”\textsuperscript{138} Thatcher also assured the US President that the Trident-II will be assigned to NATO and that except in a situation of UK’s supreme national interests being threatened, the force was to be used for the purposes of the international defence of the Western Alliance in all circumstances.\textsuperscript{139} Reagan Administration appeared only too willing to oblige Britain as it fitted well with the new aggressive foreign and defence policy which the US had already started pursuing.

Conceding the British request implied that the United Kingdom could obtain the most advanced American strategic delivery system, just as it became operational, and deploy simultaneously with America’s own deployment. One of the dominant considerations for both the countries in pursuing the Trident deal was the desirability of Britain maintaining commonality with the United States in the matter of the ultimate nuclear deterrence, thereby providing the real tool for coupling the UK’s and the US’s nuclear weapons, reinforcing the rationale of ‘insurance’ and the ‘second decision making center’ concepts, traditionally used in defence of the British independent deterrence.

This was emphasized by the government again in 1980 just before announcing the decision to purchase the Trident from the US:

\textsuperscript{138} UK, HMSO, \textit{The British Strategic Nuclear Force}, Cmnd. 8517, March 1982, p.3.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
If Britain is to meet effectively the deterrent purpose of providing a second center of decision-making within the Alliance, our force has to be visibly capable of posing a massive threat on its own... We need to convince Soviet leaders that even if they thought that at some critical point as a conflict developed the US would hold back, the British force could still inflict a blow so destructive that the penalty for aggression would have proved too high.\(^{140}\)

Answering those who opposed Trident, the 1985 White Paper further stated:

The critics of Trident must show that we must be less, rather than more, vulnerable to attack if we unilaterally abandoned a capability that has been an integral part of the structure of collective Western and European security for over thirty years; or else they must argue persuasively that an alternative system could provide a credible and cost-effective deterrent in the complex and demanding environment of the early decades of the next century. We are convinced that for Britain to abandon its nuclear deterrent would constitute a reckless gamble with the peace and security of future generations... \(^{141}\)

Therefore, the government was convinced that, since the Trident-II D5 was expected to be in service up to the year 2020, it was the “best way of providing a credible deterrent into the 21st century.”\(^{142}\) Without it the Alliance would have found it difficult to give teeth to its operational doctrine of flexible response. The Agreement to purchase the Trident was to mark a period of closest ever strategic relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States since the end of the War. This relationship was visible in almost all areas of their foreign and defence policy management, including in the otherwise restrained sphere of nuclear weapons.\(^{143}\)

The INF Modernization

Yet another important issue that stands out in Britain’s post war defence policy is that of the modernization of the Theatre Nuclear Forces, initiated in the late-1970s. In December 1979 the NATO Ministerial Council decided to deploy a significant number of Long-Range Theatre Nuclear Force, later renamed the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) in the European theatre. Britain had played a crucial role in


\(^{142}\) Ibid.
building up the case for their deployment. The decision was closely linked to the strategy of nuclear deterrence pursued by Britain.

On 13 December 1979, the British Secretary of State for Defence, Francis Pym, announced in the House of Commons: “Faced with the rapid growth in Soviet long-range theatre nuclear capability, notably the deployment of large numbers of modern SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers, at a time when the Alliance’s own equivalent forces are increasing in age and vulnerability, we concluded that some modernization of NATO’s theatre nuclear capability is essential.”144 Later, while choosing Greenham Common and Molesworth as the location for the deployment of the cruise missiles in Britain, Francis Pym stated, amidst growing popular protest against the US missiles: “if we do not protect ourselves adequately and if we do not have an adequate shield, freedom and democracy will not be continued into the future.... If we are not adequately defended, the whole world may be taken over by the Soviet Union ....”145

By late 1970s, there was a general feeling among the European NATO members that the perceived edge that the West had in the nuclear weapons arena has been neutralized by the Soviet advances in the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) technology. Many in the West had begun to feel that the strategic balance was tilted in favour of the Warsaw Pact – that the increased vulnerability of the United States reduced the effectiveness of the nuclear deterrence for the West Europeans.

At each escalatory threshold – conventional, tactical-nuclear, theatre-nuclear, intercontinental counterforce – the Soviet Union now seemed to be having an advantage. The Soviet conventional superiority was something that the West had learned to live with, based on their assumed superiority on the nuclear field. Now faced with the reality of Warsaw Pact nuclear superiority the Western Powers concluded that it was imperative to match their capabilities in the nuclear field in the

143 This aspect is elaborately dealt with in Chapter V of the present study.
144 UK, Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Sessions 1978-79. 13 December 1979, Col. 1540.
European theatre so that deterrence based on Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) could be sustained. It was generally believed that deployment of survivable theatre forces of a range sufficient to engage critical targets in the Warsaw Pact areas would make NATO’s threat of deliberate escalation more credible and its threat of theatre retaliation both more credible and menacing to the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{146} According to Roger Ruston the NATO decision to deploy 464 Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM) and 108 \textit{Pershing II} ballistic missiles in the European theatre was motivated by several considerations:

- Alarm and fear in the West over the Soviet buildup and achievement of parity in nuclear systems, with apparent superiority in some areas, such as ICBMs;
- New technical developments coming along in the pipeline, especially increased missile accuracy, cruise technology and enhanced radiation weapons;
- The loss of confidence in Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and re-emphasis of counter-force doctrines and ideas of limited nuclear war;
- The arms-control process itself, in that the SALT agreements between the US and the USSR, settled over the heads of the European members of NATO, appeared to them to be institutionalizing a local imbalance in favour of the Warsaw Pact, and at the same time, to be weakening the American guarantee to defend Western Europe with its strategic nuclear weapons;
- The rise in the United States of powerful lobbies hostile to the aims of \textit{détente} and arms control as previously understood.\textsuperscript{147}

All the member-countries of NATO were parties to the decision and part of the cost for the deployment was to be met from NATO’s common funding arrangements. As per the decision, Britain was to get a share of 160 \textit{Cruise} missiles in her territory.\textsuperscript{148} These missiles were considered to be highly accurate, capable of avoiding the Soviet anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defences and could be fired from a variety of platforms, on land, sea or in the air. They were also found to be highly cost-effective. British strategic planners felt that these missiles could considerably enhance their deterrent capabilities. Without them, it was perceived that the strategy of

\textsuperscript{146} Peter Malone, \textit{The British Nuclear Deterrent} (Kent, Croom Helm, 1984), p.177.
\textsuperscript{147} Roger Ruston, n.18, pp.179-180.
\textsuperscript{148} UK, Commons, n.144, Col.1540.
Flexible Response was incomplete. Justifying the decision, the Defence Secretary stated that UK’s support to this programme was essential, “if we are to avoid a dangerous gap emerging in NATO’s theatre nuclear capability. Such a gap would weaken the Alliance’s strategy of flexible response and so cast doubt on the credibility of our deterrent capability. This decision is also a demonstration of the cohesion and political will of the Alliance to respond to a growing Soviet threat and to resist a massive Soviet propaganda campaign.”

Essentially it was out of NATO-Europe’s realization of its inability to match the Warsaw Pact’s conventional military strength, supported by an enormous quantity of advanced, accurately targetable nuclear missiles, and its own inability to offer effective deterrence that Britain had to subscribe to the deployment of American long-range theatre nuclear weapons in Europe. In the face of the SS-20 missiles of the Soviets, already deployed in Eastern Europe, without a matching Western counter force, NATO’s strategy of flexible response would have become militarily non-viable. Hence the Theatre Nuclear Forces Modernization and the NATO ‘dual-track’ decision of December 1979 were explained by the British Government, in the context of the increased Soviet missiles deployment in Eastern Europe, in the following words:

...for NATO to have done nothing in these circumstances would have resulted in a severe erosion of its capability to deter – aggression and would have been seen as a lack of resolve to maintain the security of the Alliance. This would have encouraged the Soviet Union to think that it could threaten the European members of NATO with nuclear strikes without provoking a response from the strategic forces of the United States, which are the ultimate guarantee of Allied security, and so decouple the United States from the defence of Europe.

Britain was not merely subscribing to the NATO position nor was this statement a mere endorsement of the other European leaders, particularly the West German. In fact, it was Britain, in the course of the defence review in 1975, that first voiced Europe’s concern about the already existing nuclear imbalance, in favour of the Warsaw Pact, in the

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149 Ibid., Col.1541.
European theatre. The 1975 Statement on Defence Estimates made the British Government’s concern in the matter clear:

The strategic nuclear force of the West are the ultimate deterrent against strategic nuclear attack. But in a period of strategic parity they do not necessarily constitute a credible deterrent against lower levels of aggression. For this purpose the West must also deploy credible number of conventional and tactical nuclear forces. These can be provided in an effective way only through the North Atlantic Alliance to whose support the government is fully committed.\(^1\)

This was the first time that a West European power formally expressed its concern about the increased Soviet nuclear threat to the security of Western Europe. This statement was important for several reasons. First, it came from a Labour Party Government, the Party which subsequently opposed the nuclear weapons and voted in the House of Commons against the deployment of American missiles in Britain in 1983 and also which had threatened that, if it was voted to power it would call for the withdrawal of American missiles from Britain’s territory.\(^2\)

Secondly, it came at a time when the negotiations for reducing tension and for promoting peaceful co-existence (European détente) were progressing well and an agreement to maintain the status-quo in Europe was in sight. The Labour Government’s apprehensions of mid 1970s was clearly inconsistent with its declared optimism about détente. It was also important that Britain’s fear was expressed even before the Soviets had started deploying its advanced SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe. The Labour Government’s last Statement on Defence Estimates in 1979 had also recognized the importance of nuclear defence provided mainly by the American strategic nuclear forces and supplemented by their conventional forces and the European Long-Range Theatre Nuclear Forces (LRTNF). The 1979 Statement said: “The strategic nuclear forces provided essentially by the United States give protection and ultimate deterrence. The TNF in which several Alliance members participate in various ways are a crucial link between the


Strategic forces and the conventional elements.\textsuperscript{153} All these lead to the conclusion that the Labour Party, in power, never wanted to gamble with Britain’s security. Its well-considered decision to “retreat to Europe” was also to strengthen the British defence within Europe, where it was perceived facing a threat from the Warsaw Pact.

The immediate provocation for the 1979 decision to modernize the Theatre Nuclear Forces in Europe was believed to be the West German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt’s address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London in May 1977, when he pointedly referred to the implications of Superpower parity for Western Europe’s defences.\textsuperscript{154} Schmidt claimed that SALT had neutralized American and Soviet central Strategic systems and expressed his concern about the military reality and political shadow of the Soviet Union’s overwhelming advantage in the European theatre. Earlier, at the NATO Summit, in May 1977, also Chancellor Schmidt had emphasized how the onset of strategic parity had ushered in a third phase in East-West military relations. He argued that NATO Europe no longer relied on the deterrent capabilities of superior American strategic forces, as in the 1950s, or on the flexible response strategy of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, the Soviet attainment of strategic parity has introduced a third phase making it necessary to reduce the political and military role of strategic nuclear weapons as a normal component of Europe’s defence and deterrence.\textsuperscript{155}

Helmut Schmidt’s statement that “the strategic nuclear component would become increasingly regarded as an instrument of last resort to serve the national interest and protect the survival of those who possessed these weapons of last resort,”\textsuperscript{156} was, indeed, a European voice, which was shared equally by Britain. This implied that in the face of the attainment of strategic parity and even superiority in certain areas by the Soviet Union the basis of deterrence has been undermined and that the West needed to either reassess

\textsuperscript{154} The Text of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt’s 1977 Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture, See, Survival, IISS (Jan-Feb. 1978), Vol. XX, No.1, pp.2-10
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
their requirements for effective deterrence or to revise their own strategies in the context of the changed circumstances.

As against the already expressed British concern Chancellor Schmidt's statement got immediate response for various reasons. Firstly, though expressed in candid terms, the British fear was meant mainly for domestic consumption as it was evident from the fact that Britain was not the first to take the matter to the NATO forum. Secondly, as against the British statement made in the détente climate, Schmidt's statement came in the context of the emerging crisis of détente as was evident from the Soviet deployment of its advanced SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missiles in Eastern Europe directed against the West. This provided the military rationale for NATO's acquiring a similar Intermediate range Nuclear Forces (INF) capacity. Schmidt was also critical of America's negotiating strategy in the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT-II) and in the MBFR as many in the West feared that America was overlooking some of the European security interests. Drawing the attention of the strategic planners to the hidden risks in the negotiations he said: "the Soviet Union has substantially increased her strategic reinforcement capabilities and could rapidly bring forward forces concentrated outside the reduction area, whereas American forces, if reduced in MBFR, would be cut off from Europe by the Atlantic."157 Schmidt also cautioned that "we in Europe must be particularly careful to ensure that these [SALT] negotiations do not neglect the component of NATO's deterrent strategy."158

The NATO Summit took the European concerns seriously and recognized the need for TNF modernization by including it as point 10 of its Long Term Defence Programme (LTDP). The American administration, under President Jimmy Carter, was also convinced that the TNF modernization was one way to respond to the concerns voiced by Europe. Consequent upon the failure of the NATO's nuclear planning group (NPG) to study the problem of TNF, a special body, the High Level Group (HLG), was appointed to solve the TNF issue. The HLG recommended that for political and military reasons the alliance should adopt both a deployment and arms control approach and re-establish a NATO land

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157 Helmut Schmidt, n. 154, p.5.
158 Ibid., p.4.
based intermediate-range missile capability which the Alliance did not have since the 1960s. The objective was to convey an alliance response that would both induce the Soviets to negotiate seriously over INF systems, and at the same time, provide NATO with a credible INF military capability. A formal decision, on the lines of the recommendations of the High Level Group, was taken in December 1979, which provided for the modernization of intermediate-range nuclear weapons.

This decision was seen as strengthening the coupling of NATO forces to American strategic forces, a coupling that, many argued, had been called into question by the onset of US-Soviet strategic parity. From the time the Soviet Union began to reach that parity with the United States, there was a growing concern within the Alliance that parity would neutralize American strategic forces and thereby expose Western Europe to the Soviet nuclear blackmail. With the Soviet Union attaining strategic parity in the 1970s, the West European NATO members began to think that only with a long-range theatre-nuclear force capability (i.e. systems capable of striking the Soviet Union from the European territory/Euro-strategic weapons) can they close the ‘missile gap’ and continue to maintain the credibility of the NATO continuum of deterrence, based on the strategy of flexible response, up to and including American strategic forces. According to Freedman, Pershing and Cruise were helpful in upsetting the Soviet calculations that with the achievement of nuclear parity with the US they could maintain their territory as a sanctuary in War.159 Substantial Western theatre forces contributed to deterrence by making the prospects of cheap victory for the Soviets less certain or simply uncertain.160

For Britain TNF modernization was very much in conformity with the pronounced strategy of deterrence. Through a special information leaflet on the role and function of the Cruise missiles, issued in 1981 in the backdrop of growing public criticism and concern about their strategic use, the British government denied the allegations that the cruise missiles were meant to be used as 'first strike weapons' or with an intention to fight

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159 Lawrence Freedman's answers to questions on different aspects of British Defence Policy, especially on its nuclear deterrent policy, in, Oliver Rambsbotham, *Choices: Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Defence Options*, (London, Brassey's, 1987), p.239.
160 Peter Malone, n.146, p.177.
125

a 'limited nuclear war.' On the contrary, it was claimed that those missiles could help in preventing a war – by deterring aggression. The MOD leaflet stated:

To maintain deterrence we need to show that if they ever contemplated attacking us ... with nuclear weapons, we could respond at a similar level. We would not be left with only the options of just surrendering or having to launch a massive nuclear retaliation .... Thus cruise missiles will strengthen deterrence. And by helping us to prevent war ever breaking out they will enable us to avoid ever having to make a choice between 'red and dead.' ¹⁶¹

INF systems were not seen as providing an in-theatre military capability that by itself could deter Soviet aggression or the use of Soviet SS-20s. They were considered necessary to deal with the Soviet Union from a position of strength. They could be used to dissuade any military adventures by the Soviet Union before they launched an attack, by reminding them of the consequences, the possible use of the 'theatre' missiles being more credible than that of 'strategic' weapons. ¹⁶² They were to be projected as something that could demonstrate the resolve of the West to stand up to the Soviet threat. The MOD information-leaflet stated it clearly:

... if we only had nuclear weapons like the Polaris, and were in danger of defeat, we could be faced with two stark choices – surrender or all-out nuclear war. Having small medium-range nuclear weapons would give us another choice in those circumstances – allowing us to bring home to the Russians the appalling risks they would run if they pressed us further. The aim of using them would be to persuade the Russian leadership – even at the eleventh hour – to draw back. ¹⁶³

In the eventuality of a local conflict not being able to be contained at the theatre-level these weapons were expected to act as a trigger for the possible use of American strategic systems. The INF systems were seen by the West European governments primarily as a “means of holding American strategic forces hostage to the defence of Europe.” ¹⁶⁴

In the British strategy of deterrence, however, there was an implied threat of resort

¹⁶¹ UK, MOD, ‘Cruise Missiles: Some Important Questions and Answers’ October 1981. (Information leaflets issued to reassure the public about the implications of the Cruise missiles being deployed in Europe).
¹⁶² Roger Ruston, n. 18, p.185.
¹⁶³ MOD, Cruise Missiles, n.161.
to first strike as a surer way to avoid a war with the Soviet Union. Since a no first use of nuclear weapons policy increased the risk of a conventional war, a policy posture of readiness to use nuclear weapons even against a massive conventional attack was necessary for effectively deterring all wars. Britain has, therefore, been convinced all along that the INF was an essential component of this strategy so that there existed a 'seamless robe of deterrence.' Reliance on the United States' INF systems was necessary for matching both the quality and the quantity of the corresponding Soviet systems. NATO could have ignored the INF systems only if the Warsaw Pact's conventional forces were reduced substantially, so as to eliminate any possibility of a massive Warsaw Pact conventional attack on NATO territory.

The American nuclear umbrella, supplemented by the British and the French nuclear forces, constituted an essential component of the security framework for West Europe. Pragmatic as it was, on returning to power in 1979 the Conservative Party government saw the INF modernization as being in conformity with this military fact and went ahead with the missile deployment in British territory, despite strong opposition from several quarters, including from the Labour Party. Defending the government position, the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said at a Press Conference before the 1983 elections: "If this is a deterrent, then the Russians must know that under certain circumstances it would be fired. Otherwise, it would cease to be a deterrent. As a deterrent, knowing that under certain circumstances it would be fired, it has kept the peace." Reacting to the contention that it would be an act of criminal insanity for a Prime Minister to use nuclear retaliation against Soviet aggression, Margaret Thatcher said: "If they (the Soviets) believe that some one was just sitting there and saying, well, we have got them, but don’t worry... we would never use them, then it wouldn’t be a deterrent .... The only alternative to nuclear deterrent is surrender or capitulation."

165 British Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe's speech at the Foreign Press Association, on 17 March 1987, Cited in, Beatrice Heuser, n.60, p.83.
166 Ibid., p.82.
167 Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Douglas Hurd's Speech to the Tory Reform Group's Annual Conference, Cited in, Heuser, n.60, p.83.
169 The Times (London), 2 June 1983.
In the BBC Panorama, a few days before the 1983 elections, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, explained her refusal to formally seek dual key control of American Cruise missiles based on British territory by accusing those who argued for it of "mistrusting our allies." She claimed that nobody can deny the fact that what has kept peace in Europe since 1945 was the mutually opposing collective security arrangement – the NATO and the Warsaw Pact – backed by the balance of nuclear terror.  

Britain, more than any other country, believed that anything that damages that collective security or upsets that balance of terror would increase the possibility of war. TNF modernization, for Britain, was part of her strategy to avoid a war in Europe. Britain, like the rest of Western Europe, while not accepting that the Soviet Union was simply waiting for a chance to take over the West at the first opportunity, had to live under the perpetual fear of the Soviet ill-intentions. It was to reduce this fear and instill more confidence that American missiles were sought to be deployed in Britain. Explaining the rationale behind the British support for NATO's INF modernization decision, the 1984 Statement on Defence Estimates said:

...the only force in this category [i.e. capable of striking Soviet territory from bases in Western Europe] before the initial deployment of Perishing II and Cruise missiles, consisted of about 150 US F-III aircraft based in the United Kingdom. These aircrafts will experience growing difficulty in penetrating Soviet air defences and their air-field bases are comparatively vulnerable to attack. Without modernization, NATO's capability could have been expected to decline steadily in effectiveness in the coming years. The result would have been a dangerous gap in the range of forces that NATO must maintain if it is to be able to deter aggression at every possible level - from conventional through to strategic nuclear attack. The Soviet Union had already made a major improvement in its own capability in this area by introducing large numbers of the SS-20 missiles which, compared with the earlier SS-4 and SS-5 missiles, has a larger range and greater accuracy, is mobile and has three independently targeted warheads when its predecessors had only one. It was against this background that NATO reached its decision to deploy 464 GLCM and 108 Pershing II missiles in Europe. 

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170 The Times (London), 3 June 1983.  
Though, Britain had not insisted on ‘double key’ arrangement for the American nuclear weapons deployed in the British territory an informal understanding, reached between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Reagan in 1983, provided that no nuclear weapons would be fired or launched from British territory without the agreement of the British Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{172} Faced with increasing domestic opposition to the Cruise missile deployment, Prime Minister Thatcher reassured the House of Commons in May 1983: “the effect of the understandings and the arrangements for implementing them is that no nuclear weapon would be fired or launched from British territory without the agreement of the British Prime Minister.”\textsuperscript{173} Though this was not specifically provided for in the case of the new TNF, it was taken to be obvious. This assurance was repeated by the then Secretary of State for Defence Michael Heseltine in the House of Commons on 31 October 1983: “No nuclear weapons will be fired or bases used without the agreement of both the Prime Minister and the President.”\textsuperscript{174} In fact, the British desire to be consulted on any possible decision by the American President to use the nuclear weapons runs through the US-UK relations a continuous thread.\textsuperscript{175}

America also recognized the importance of Britain in its nuclear planning. As Lord Carrington, a senior Conservative British statesman put it, the French and British deterrent forces absolved the Americans from having total responsibility for Western deterrence. The Americans would only feel good about the fact that others are prepared to share the responsibility.\textsuperscript{176} British position on the INF issue was crucial for the Alliance for yet another reason. It has been Britain’s consistent endeavour to help to evolve consensus on nuclear issues within the Alliance. As Heuser puts it:

In many respects...Britain’s governments kept the Alliance together, persuaded it to adopt compromises between British-inspired principles for nuclear use reflecting European concerns, and American preferences, they kept the Americans committed to Europe and the Germans from despairing of American plans on how to defend Western Europe. Within NATO, Britain has very successfully played the

\textsuperscript{175} Beatrice Heuser, n.60, p.69.
\textsuperscript{176} See, Oliver Rambsotham, n.135, p.165.
role of the consensus-builder, one of the main characteristics of the British approach to nuclear strategy.\textsuperscript{177}

But this was a peace-time thinking. On the other hand, strategically, Britain had to foresee also an eventuality in which America, in its own security interest, refused to respond or delayed its support for Europe against a Soviet attack. Indeed, a reason given in support of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent was that it would meet such an eventuality. The 1980 Defence White Paper had recognized this point. It said: "...the decision to use the United States' nuclear weapons in defence of Europe with all the risks to the US homeland would entail, would be immensely grave .... A Soviet leadership might believe that at some point in the development of conflict, the determination of the Americans could waver."\textsuperscript{178} Therefore Britain needed her own weapons "to convince the Soviet leaders that even if they thought that at some critical point as a conflict developed the US would hold back, the British force could still inflict a blow so destructive that the penalty for aggression would have proved too high."\textsuperscript{179}

Defending the government's policy of pursuing the INF modernization and the simultaneous plan for the replacement of Polaris by Trident-II D5, the Secretary of State for Defence said: "In strategic thinking what matters most is not what we think but what the Russians think, the task is to present to a would be aggressor... a clear chain of terrible risk."\textsuperscript{180} This need also justified both the maintenance of a national nuclear force and the government's decision to accept deployment of the US missiles in Britain. That was why the TNF modernization plan was supplemented by a simultaneous modernization of Britain's independent nuclear component – the replacement of Polaris with the most advanced Trident-II D5 system, which was seen at that time as the ultimate independent strategic nuclear deterrent in the service of Britain's supreme national security interest.

\textsuperscript{177} Beatrice Heuser, n.60, p.91.
\textsuperscript{179} UK, MOD, Defence Open Government Document, 80/23, July 1980, Cited in, Beatrice Heuser, n.60, p.90.
\textsuperscript{180} UK, Commons, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, Vol. 977, Col.678.
Once again, in 1985, the government rejected the argument that intermediate range nuclear forces and other short range deployment were unnecessary and undesirable because they might lead to limited nuclear war. It also rejected the suggestion that Britain should return to relying entirely on the US strategic nuclear defences. The government’s explanation was that such a step would imply a return to the old strategy of trip-wire (*massive retaliation*), weaken the US-Europe link, and would pose all the same difficulties for deterrence that led to the abandonment of the original strategy in the 1960s.

The issue of INF modernization in Britain’s nuclear and Alliance Policy presented a picture of continuity, reiterating some of the cardinal elements of the logic behind Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent. Although the need for the modernization of a theatre nuclear force was felt by the British Government as early as in 1975, as mentioned earlier, the INF modernization did not become an Alliance issue until 1977, until after the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt voiced European fears of decoupling of the Trans-Atlantic alliance. Therefore, by endorsing and backing the European concern, Britain demonstrated that Alliance cohesion on nuclear matters was one of its top priorities.

However, being the only European nuclear power of the Alliance, besides France which has been out of the NATO’s unified military command since 1966, Britain’s stand on decoupling could not have been identical with its non-nuclear European Alliance members. Since an independent deterrence at the strategic level was also required, Britain supplemented the INF modernization with its own strategic deterrent force, the *Trident II D5* system.

This period demonstrated that British nuclear doctrine, after a period of transition, had come to rest on a different plane, reflecting a new balance between the logic of maintaining the transatlantic nuclear linkage and of deterring Soviet Union in Europe. The apparent contradiction between these two stances of British nuclear policy became a factor in the country’s domestic politics. The politics involved in the nuclear doctrinal legitimacy compelled the Labour Party to oppose the INF modernization whereas the Conservative Government retained the political will to push through the programme in
spite of vocal domestic opposition. One enduring legacy of the INF modernization is the debate on the fundamentals of British defence policy it generated in its wake. It remains a moot question, as to what extent this transformed domestic political environment would affect the continuing logic of Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent. Between continuity and change, the balance may well rest with the former.

Conclusion

Britain maintains a whole range of nuclear weapon systems, with certain well defined political and military roles attached to it. Firstly, Britain sees it as an integral part of NATO’s defensive mechanism; and within NATO, as a second, and not secondary, centre of decision. Since the early 1950s, the British government had claimed that its nuclear force had played a crucial and, indeed, a unique role in enhancing the security of the NATO by providing a nuclear deterrent capability committed to the Alliance, yet fully under the control of a European member of the Alliance.

It was assumed that the existence of a separate nuclear force, under the full command of a European state like Britain capable of inflicting enormous damage, would make the Soviet Union to think very seriously about the desirability of venturing an aggression on Western Europe. It thus provided an extra insurance for the Alliance to the extent that it represented an additional centre of decision making. As such it helped to complicate the calculations of a potential aggressor. British deterrent was also seen as a trigger for the use of the much bigger American nuclear arsenal. If the American Government were hesitant in a crisis, or both the Super Powers agreed to try to limit a conflict to Europe, the British deterrent could be used as a catalyst to force the American hand. This was based on the assumption that the Soviet leaders would not be able to distinguish between the British and the American missiles, and, given the mutual suspicion of any European confrontation, they would inevitably respond to any nuclear attack by striking the United States itself. In turn, the United States would be forced to respond with its strategic arsenals.
Britain’s strategic nuclear capability was also seen as an insurance policy for an uncertain future. As a result of the apparent strategic parity between the United States and the USSR and the increased questioning of the American nuclear guarantee to Europe, it was frequently argued that in a dangerous world, Britain must have the ultimate control over its own national security. It was also felt that a politically integrated future Europe would force States to reconsider proposals for a European Defence Community and perhaps a nuclear deterrent system of its own. In such an eventuality Britain would be, in collaboration with France, able to provide the nucleus of a future European defence system. An independent nuclear force under Britain’s exclusive control was also expected to confer a degree of international prestige and status for Britain, a point it needed to deal both with its ally, the United States, and its adversaries elsewhere, especially in the arms control negotiations, from a position of strength. Indeed the possession of nuclear weapons also enabled Britain to play an influential role in the nuclear planning group in NATO, since it was the only European nuclear power in the Alliance.

The central theme of all these arguments is that Britain’s dependence on nuclear weapons was the most effective deterrent against the potential aggressors at all levels. The British strategy of defensive deterrence was made possible by the existing range of nuclear weapons. Building up the required level of conventional forces to match the Soviet bloc would have been prohibitively expensive for Britain individually, and for the NATO alliance collectively. Therefore, Britain and the Alliance consistently took the position that it will not feel restrained about using the whole range of nuclear weapons at its disposal, even to deny a conventional advantage to the Warsaw Pact, so that the adversaries did not venture any kind of aggression against the West.

This overriding concern to avoid another global war, and particularly a European one, runs through the defence policy of post-War Britain. All the underlying rationale for maintaining a whole range of nuclear weapons, even though they are based on hypothetical assumptions, are also meant to serve that objective. The very fact that Europe has experienced the longest ever period of existence without a real ‘hot war’ proves the validity of this rationale. The validity of Winston Churchill’s predictions that the nuclear
weapons "will bring an utterly unforeseeable security to mankind", still holds. It is another matter that, as Churchill observed, ironically, the 'safety' that the nuclear weapons has brought about is the 'sturdy child of terror' and human survival, linked to that safety, has been the 'twin brother of annihilation'. These contrasting components of 'safety', 'terror' and the potential for 'annihilation' have all worked together in maintaining peace in Europe for so long.

It was this doctrinaire framework, supported by the real-life experience of a whole generation of British leaders and the people at large that prevailed on the defence policy-makers not to seriously tamper with the nuclear deterrence system of Britain even while initiating large scale Defence Reviews of 1957, 1968, 1975 and 1981. Even those who were not convinced of the moral basis and the intellectual arguments about the effectiveness of the deterrent, actually shied away from fiddling with the deterrent system already in place even when they had the authority and the opportunity to do so. Once in power, the skeptics have been overtaken by the notions of 'prestige', of 'insurance' and of the real tested value of deterrence, that the nuclear weapons provided. The best or the worst that they could do was to revise the operational doctrines without seriously affecting the fundamental rationale for their continued maintenance. This was apparent in the occasional revision of the strategic doctrines and the concomitant improvement/modifications in the weapons systems effected throughout the period of the present study.

And once having evolved a credible strategy of deterrence, there was a lot of debate about the finer details of that strategy. Concepts like, massive retaliation, graduated deterrence, flexible response, etc. were part of this attempt to evolve the finer details. The result, though sometimes contributed to confusing both friends and foes alike, is that there never was any ambiguity on the position that the nuclear weapons are meant to be used against any aggressor who could attempt to derive any political or military advantage against the West through the use of force. To Britain, deterrence was meant not only to avoid a nuclear exchange but, equally, to avoid a conventional war as well, which could eventually lead to a nuclear war which both sides wanted to avoid. An undertaking not to
strike first would not in itself deter all wars, but, on the other hand, a policy posture that a conventional attack would be reciprocated by a nuclear attack would, out of fear of mutual destruction, deter not only a conventional war but a nuclear war as well. It is based on the assumption that if the sanction was sufficiently catastrophic for the target actor, it would be dissuaded, whatever the likelihood of the sanction being applied.

By the late 1950s, mounting costs of warheads and delivery systems had forced successive British governments to abandon the idea of a totally independent nuclear force in favour of cheaper American technology. Britain’s dependence on the US for its security has been a fait accompli ever since the end of the War. For the effectiveness of the nuclear deterrence also Britain is heavily dependent on the advanced delivery systems made available by the US. However, the fact that this dependence is part of the integrated war plans evolved between the two countries cannot be overlooked.

Even after the endless debate about the nuclear question spread for over four decades, Britain, in the mid-1980s continued to be convinced about the need to maintain a strategic nuclear capability, as the ultimate deterrent at its disposal. The much prized independent deterrent, however, remained so only in the matter of their use in the interest of ‘supreme national interest’ as the dependence on the United States for the delivery systems has considerably reduced the content of the independent element in the deterrent.

In spite of Britain’s persistent efforts to make it look like a special relationship between two equally sovereign nations, there were several occasions when the British had to depend on the goodwill of the United States to make it appear to be special, prompting observers to comment that the relationship ‘is not as much special for the Americans as it is for the British’. More than in any other area where this claim for equality and sovereignty has been put to test, and conceded only to the extent that the Americans wanted it, was in the field of nuclear cooperation.

However, to the extent that in a critical situation, having a bearing on the ultimate security, independence and integrity of Britain, — or as officially coined, ‘in the interest
of her supreme national interest' – to be defined exclusively by herself, if she were to use
her deterrent forces at any level, the final word will undoubtedly be that of the leadership
of Britain. Perhaps, no other test-case is required to prove the point of 'independence' of
the nuclear weapons at Britain's disposal.