

# THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE UK STRATEGIC NUCLEAR DETERRENT

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**VOLUME II:** The Labour Government and the  
Polaris Programme, 1964–1970



MATTHEW JONES

ROUTLEDGE  


# The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent

Volume II of *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent* provides an authoritative and in-depth examination of the British government's strategic nuclear policy from 1964 to 1970.

Written with full access to the UK documentary record, this volume examines the controversies that developed over nuclear policy following the arrival in office of a Labour government led by Harold Wilson in October 1964 that openly questioned the independence of the deterrent. Having decided to preserve the Polaris programme, Labour ministers were nevertheless committed not to develop another generation of nuclear weapons beyond those in the pipeline, placing major doubts over the long-term future of the nuclear programme and collaboration with the United States. Defence planners also became increasingly concerned that the deployment of Soviet anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defences around Moscow threatened to undermine the ability of Polaris to fulfil its role as a national strategic nuclear deterrent. During 1967, under heavy pressures to control defence spending, a protracted debate was conducted within Whitehall over the future of Polaris and how to respond to the evolving ABM challenge. The volume concludes with Labour's defeat at the general election of June 1970, by which time the Royal Navy had assumed the nuclear deterrent role from the RAF, and plans had already been formulated for a UK project to improve Polaris which could both ensure its continuing credibility and rejuvenate the Anglo-American nuclear relationship.

This book will be of much interest to students of British politics, Cold War history, nuclear proliferation and international relations.

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## **The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent**

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Vol. II: The Labour Government and the Polaris Programme, 1964–1970

*Matthew Jones*

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Volume II: The Labour Government and  
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# Preface

It is under 20 years since the first atomic bomb exploded in the desert of New Mexico. That is not a long time for mankind to come to terms with a revolution which has upset many of the basic principles of international politics painfully elaborated during the last 3,000 years. But Her Majesty's Government have learned at least one lesson, of which many of us on this side of the House were deeply conscious long before atomic power was thought of. That is, that the only possible security is collective security. Chauvinism and isolationism, atomic or conventional, are a sure road to catastrophe.

(Denis Healey during the House of Commons debate on the annual Defence White Paper, 3 March 1965)

What we have been trying to tell [the Conservative Opposition] is that anyone who wants to stay in the independent nuclear hunt cannot take a once-for-all decision and then go independent. He must be prepared to keep his weapons up to date at a high cost and at a high degree of interdependence on our allies.

(Harold Wilson during the House of Commons debate on the annual Defence White Paper, 4 March 1965)

The official historian who covers in their work the formation and execution of any aspect of British nuclear policy follows in the footsteps of some very distinguished company. Engaged from 1959 onwards as the archivist and historian of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (AEA), Margaret Gowing provided an incomparable example by producing, along with her successor Lorna Arnold, several authoritative and multi-layered studies, based on an extensive survey of government documents, which covered the early history of Britain's nuclear weapons programme, including the ministerial policymaking that carried it forward.<sup>1</sup> Since the appearance in 1974 of their two-volume work *Independence and Deterrence*, however, which concluded with the accomplishment of the first British atomic test in October 1952 – and despite the original intention to extend the AEA-commissioned series of histories to 1958–59, when Anglo-American nuclear collaboration was fully restored after the rupture experienced in the early post-war years – nothing has appeared under official auspices which adopts a similarly large canvas. Several smaller scale projects did emerge in

subsequent years: having assisted Gowing with the compilation and writing of her post-war volumes, Arnold took up her mantle at the AEA with alacrity and generated specialist studies under official sponsorship which looked at UK atomic weapons trials in Australia during the 1950s, the Windscale nuclear accident in 1957, and the road to the first British thermonuclear tests in 1957–58.<sup>2</sup> But in conceiving of a successor volume to *Independence and Deterrence*, Gowing (who had meanwhile moved on to become Professor of the History of Science at Oxford) and Arnold were to find, as the latter admitted, that containing the vast and expanding scope of documents and themes for the period up to 1958–59 was to prove an insurmountable task. Sir Keith Hancock, the great Australian historian who steered the official series of Second World War civil histories through to completion, once advised Arnold that ‘there is a limit to the material that can be compressed into a “unified” history’.<sup>3</sup>

A few officially sponsored projects have also since appeared. With Ministry of Defence (MoD) sanction, a former official, Peter Nailor, produced a slim volume in 1988 which examined the programme that saw Britain successfully design, build and deploy the first of four Polaris submarines by the demanding in-service target date of 1968. Yet Nailor’s work was largely absorbed with the administrative process of Polaris programme management – pitched at the level of the Royal Navy’s Chief Polaris Executive (CPE) organisation in which he had played a part – and had little to say on high-level policy toward the strategic nuclear deterrent, or the wider context within which the whole programme evolved during the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive history of the Royal Air Force’s contribution to the nuclear deterrent role by Humphrey Wynn, working under the umbrella of the RAF’s Air Historical Branch, was also published in 1994, and included much illuminating material about nuclear policy in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup> There was no sign, however, of a more broadly conceived study. At the end of the century Arnold would speculate that the original AEA series on which she and Gowing had worked was then ‘dead beyond hope of resurrection’, and that her own most recent book on the hydrogen bomb might represent ‘a last hurrah for official nuclear history’ in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The subsequent commissioning in 2008 of a Cabinet Office official history, with sponsorship from the MoD, on the subject of the Chevaline programme – a major, once-secret Cold War project to improve the performance of the UK’s Polaris submarine-launched missile force to enable it to penetrate Soviet anti-ballistic missile defences – made Arnold’s prediction somewhat premature. The public disclosure of Chevaline in January 1980 by Francis Pym, the-then Secretary of State for Defence, in the House of Commons, and the subsequent controversy that occurred over the project’s genesis, rationale and troubled development, marked a significant watershed in post-war British nuclear history.<sup>7</sup> Six months after the existence of the Chevaline was officially acknowledged, on 15 July 1980 another chapter in British nuclear history was opened when the Government finally made its announcement that it had decided to replace Polaris during the 1990s with the US Trident C4 missile system. In March 1982, it was further announced

that the much more capable Trident D5 would be procured in lieu of the C4, and in August the first Chevaline patrol was carried out by HMS *Renown*.<sup>8</sup> As with the original arrangements under which the United States had supplied Polaris missiles during the 1960s, warheads for Trident would be designed and manufactured in Britain, while the UK would also produce a new class of nuclear-powered submarines to carry the deterrent.

The decision to acquire Trident, the groundwork for which had actually been laid by the previous Labour Government led by James Callaghan, was a potent symbol of how strong the UK-US relationship remained, with the nuclear component lying near its heart. To its defenders the Chevaline programme would maintain the credibility of the UK independent deterrent during the latter stages of the life of Polaris, bridging the period before the arrival of Trident in the 1990s. Although American assistance had been provided throughout the course of the project, much of the technology employed on Chevaline had nevertheless been derived from UK concepts and engineering designs. During the 1970s, work on the Chevaline warhead and re-entry system at Aldermaston, the home of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE), kept occupied a body of nuclear expertise which could be utilised again when at the end of that decade attention turned to the task of designing a new UK warhead for the Trident programme.

Described by one of those most involved in its history as ‘probably in technical terms the most difficult weapon system development ever undertaken by the UK,’<sup>9</sup> Chevaline was representative of a significant post-war tradition, where a whole generation of exceptionally talented and skilled scientists and engineers, tutored in the triumphant successes of British defence science in the war of 1939–45, had turned their collective energies to providing the wherewithal for Britain to maintain its technological edge over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and demonstrate the UK’s continuing technical proficiency to their American allies. At the same time, Chevaline’s history was also emblematic of many of the problems that have dogged several of the MoD’s large-scale equipment projects. Just at the moment when Chevaline was completing its final trials, it became subject to extensive and controversial criticism, most notably in a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report produced in March 1982, for its major cost overruns, slips in deployment timescale, and poor programme management, at least during its initial stages. The story of the Polaris improvement programme, from its inception to its introduction into service, was therefore certainly a substantial subject that warranted in-depth historical inquiry, not least for some of the lessons it might hold for subsequent nuclear projects, and where trade-offs sometimes had to be made between secrecy and accountability.

But the history of the development of a weapons system, valuable though this might be on its own terms, would not in itself be enough to fill the notable lacuna, identified above, in British official history covering nuclear policy for much of the Cold War period. That much was quickly apparent to the present author when approached by the Histories section of the Cabinet

Office to take on this project. Moreover, it was quite clear that it was impossible to understand the history of the Polaris improvement programme, which had its origins with original acquisition of the missile system from the United States during the 1960s, without placing it within the overall context of the evolution of post-war policy toward the establishment and maintenance of a UK strategic nuclear capability. In this more general sense then, the Chevaline programme of the 1970s was the culmination and result of an entire era of post-war British nuclear thinking and official policymaking. Tracing the story back to the start of this era, and seeing how that official mind-set developed over time, has therefore been a central preoccupation of this multi-volume work.

Across much of the post-1945 period, it is apparent, shifting beliefs and attitudes toward the efficacy of deterrence, alongside differing conceptions of nuclear independence – when Britain was part of a Western Alliance which was dominated by the overwhelming nuclear power of the United States – constituted the well-springs for an often ambiguous policy that eventually mixed alliance commitments with an abiding adherence to national control and operation. It was the continuing attachment to the possibility of independent use of the UK's nuclear force, and the level of capability needed to meet the changing requirements of deterrence when facing the threat represented by the Soviet Union's conventional and nuclear strength in Europe, that was eventually to provide the strategic rationale for a Polaris improvement programme.

But this strategic reasoning also had to be put beside other concerns and interests, sometimes more parochial, which combined to justify a continuing national programme of advanced nuclear weapons development, despite the costs involved. These included, for example, the imperative to sustain a programme of attractive work at AWRE so that the UK's technological capacity for nuclear warhead research and development was maintained, and closely related to this, the concern that in the absence of such significant UK project work, Anglo-American nuclear collaboration, so exhaustively and expensively attained in July 1958 by a crucial agreement which still serves to underpin the relationship, would wither. In addition, the possession of a nuclear force under ultimate national control had important political and diplomatic repercussions, and this in turn would often provide strong arguments for its maintenance as other elements of national power were subject to decline. The aim of the present official history has been to provide a broad study of Whitehall policymaking and attitudes toward the creation and development of a UK strategic deterrent capability, and against this essential background to explore how its effectiveness was viewed, along with the steps that were seen as necessary to assure its continuing credibility.

As I hope the reader will appreciate this is a big and wide-ranging story, which I felt could only be conveyed in the detail and scope needed by a long narrative across several volumes. Volume I examined the origins of British official thinking about deterrence and the requirements of the nuclear

weapons programme in the early post-war years, and charted the growth of debates about the balance between nuclear and conventional forces in defence policy during the 1950s. By the early 1960s, thoughts had turned to successor deterrent systems to the V-bomber force, and the crisis produced by the cancellation of the Skybolt programme led to the Anglo-American agreement over the supply of the Polaris missile system at the Nassau conference of December 1962. Already, however, the issue of ballistic missile defence was becoming a consideration in how the future of the UK force was viewed, while the Nassau Agreement itself was the subject of lingering political controversy over the meaning of nuclear independence.

Building on this initial base, the second volume of this history reconstructs how the Labour Government elected in October 1964 reacted to the Polaris programme, details how proposals for Polaris' improvement prompted deep opposition, and maps the different nuclear futures that ministers and officials were prepared to contemplate. Volume II concludes with Labour's defeat at the June 1970 election, by which point plans for Polaris improvement had been formulated by the Ministry of Defence but were still held in abeyance. A projected third volume will examine the evolution of the Polaris improvement programme during the 1970s, showing how it survived a change of government from Conservative to Labour in 1974, encountered numerous problems as costs rose and timescales slipped, until it finally reached fruition with deployment as the Chevaline system in 1982, amid much controversy and recrimination.

The narrative that follows in Volume II attempts to put the development of UK strategic nuclear policy under the Labour Government led by Harold Wilson in its proper international, political and bureaucratic context. Some attention will be given to technical matters, and in particular the issues connected with ballistic missile defence and how it could be overcome, but in common with the previous volume no attempt has been made to offer a detailed technical study of the development of the nuclear weapons programme. At the same time, many of the assumptions, choices and decisions that emerged at this technical and scientific level had connections with and implications for the higher policymaking arena. If the reader is sometimes propelled from the exchanges of senior Whitehall officials in various government departments to the assessments, reports and appraisals of defence scientists, it is to illustrate the crucial links that existed between the two realms. The prime subject matter of the history has nevertheless remained the key debates over strategic nuclear policy that were conducted between 1964 and 1970, and the interplay between official advice and ministerial decisions.

Among my main concerns here have been such matters as differing conceptions of nuclear independence and the requirements of deterrence; perceptions of credibility; assessments of the strategic environment and plans for the size, equipment and employment of the nuclear force; relations with the United States and other Western allies in the nuclear weapons field; the ever-present need to find savings in the defence budget during a period when

the economic outlook was often gloomy; and – a particular feature of this volume – the difficulties faced by Labour ministers when formal party policy came into conflict with official advice which continued to assume that retention of an effective strategic nuclear capability under national control was in the UK's long-term interests. There has also been an attempt to show the changing nature of the decision-making structures through which nuclear policy was executed, and to provide illustrations of the heterodox opinions and perspectives that could often be found within government in this area. Bureaucratic structures, it is argued, mattered greatly as policy deliberations wound their way through the intricate network of committees and working groups that formed the narrow world of seasoned officials until finally reaching the ministerial office or Cabinet committee meeting. Overall, the history proceeds in general terms through a chronological narrative rather than being organised along thematic lines. The latter has the obvious attraction of allowing one aspect of the story to be followed from origins to fruition, but its fundamental drawback is the loss of the sense in which issues were often intermeshed in both substance and time. Almost invariably policymakers had to deal with their numerous options and problems concurrently, juggling priorities and wider (often political) considerations, while at the same time responding to changes in the international environment.

I have been acutely aware throughout this venture that many serious academic scholars of British nuclear history during the Cold War era have paved the way for others by their often careful and scrupulous examination of the open documentary record.<sup>10</sup> But the constraints of official secrecy have meant that access to some documents in such a nominally sensitive area as nuclear policy has often been restricted, while relatively little attention has been given by scholars to the Polaris phase of deterrent history from the early 1960s onwards. With the benefit of this author's status as an official historian, the current history has been informed by free access to such closed and hitherto inaccessible material across many different departments of government, providing a major opportunity to pursue subjects where the open record has sometimes been incomplete. Hence it has been possible to gather records from the Prime Minister's Office, Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Treasury, Atomic Energy Authority, Ministry of Supply, and Ministry of Technology, as well as to use the private paper collections of some of the main participants. This current project may be one of the last manifestations of the UK government's ventures into official history, and this melancholic knowledge has imbued in me mixed feelings of responsibility in maintaining a venerable tradition, admiration for the work of my predecessors, and gratitude for the chance to add to the genre. As Lorna Arnold once remarked, the relative luxury of official history, where an enormous array of records are available for use, allows us to better 'study the complex relationships between policy, strategy, science, and technology, and to understand more fully the reasons, choices, problems, and constraints involved. The hard realities behind the high-level decisions can be seen more

clearly.<sup>11</sup> Attention has also been given to contemporary discussion about British strategic nuclear policy in the press and parliament where relevant, while developments in US policy, derived from unclassified and open American documentary sources, are also explored for the background this offers on such subjects as attitudes to the UK's independent deterrent, assessments of the Soviet ABM programme and the prospects for ABM limitation.

Volume II illustrates the often contentious debates in official circles over Britain's nuclear future at various stages after 1964, and particular attention has been given both to the discussions that emerged in 1967 over Polaris improvement and to the subsequent review of nuclear policy in the second half of that year. The space that the events of 1967 are given in the narrative reflects their comparative neglect in other accounts, and their overall significance for the future direction of nuclear development. In June 1968, HMS *Resolution*, the first UK Polaris submarine to be built, conducted its first operational patrol, marking the successful culmination of a programme whose origins were traced in Volume I, but the future of which was by no means assured when Labour entered office after the October 1964 election. By the time of the June 1970 election a fourth Polaris boat was at sea and the Royal Air Force had relinquished its prime responsibility for the strategic nuclear deterrent role to the Royal Navy. Ministers had effectively relinquished any previous aspirations to 'internationalise' the deterrent – a goal mentioned in the Labour party's 1964 election manifesto – and there seemed every prospect that continuous deterrent patrols, with the strategic nuclear force operating under national control, assigned to NATO yet able to be withdrawn for firing purposes when 'supreme national interests' were deemed at stake (as stipulated by the Nassau Agreement), could be maintained for at least another twenty years.

Nevertheless, long-held doubts over whether Polaris could penetrate the Soviet ballistic missile defences which were being deployed at this time had already been made manifest in proposals for a Polaris improvement programme – 'Super Antelope' – which were still undecided when Labour left office. While its opponents questioned whether such a programme was required at all, and suspected the motives that lay behind it, its supporters saw it as essential if the credibility of the Polaris force as an independent deterrent was to be preserved, and if Britain was to maintain its capacity for advanced nuclear weapons development. Volume II of this official history relates this story as it unfolded within Whitehall, and in its details are to be found the origins of much of the controversy, and some of the problems, that would cloud the subsequent Chevaline programme during the decade that was to follow. As with the previous volume in this series, I have enjoyed free access to both open and currently closed official records, but the statements, opinions, views and interpretations offered, along with any errors, remain mine alone.

Matthew Jones

## Notes

- 1 Margaret Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939–1945* (London, 1964); Margaret Gowing, assisted by Lorna Arnold, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952. Volume 1: Policy Making and Volume 2: Policy Execution* (London, 1974).
- 2 Lorna Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship: British Atomic Weapon Trials in Australia* (London, 1987); *Windscale 1957: Anatomy of a Disaster* (London, 1992); *Britain and the H-bomb* (London, 2001).
- 3 See Lorna Arnold, 'A Letter from Oxford: The History of Nuclear History in Britain,' *Minerva*, 38, 2000, 201–19.
- 4 Peter Nailor, *The Nassau Connection: The Organisation and Management of the British Polaris Project* (London, 1988).
- 5 Humphrey Wynn, *The RAF Nuclear Deterrent Forces: their origins, roles and deployment, 1946–1969* (London, 1994).
- 6 Arnold, 'A Letter from Oxford,' 212–3.
- 7 *Hansard*, House of Commons debates (HC), cols 672–82, vol 977, 24 January 1980; see also 'Gasps from Labour at £1,000m Polaris plan,' *The Times*, 25 January 1980.
- 8 See Cmnd 7979, *The British Strategic Nuclear Force*, July 1980; Defence Open Government Document 80/23, *The Future United Kingdom Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Force*, July 1980.
- 9 Fred East minute for Sir Robert Armstrong, 'Chevaline,' Td/027, 17 February 1982, PREM 19/694, The National Archives (TNA). All subsequent document references are to TNA material unless otherwise indicated.
- 10 Notable studies here include John Simpson, *The Independent Nuclear State: The United States, Britain and the Military Atom* (London, 1983); Ian Clark and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The British Origins of Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1955* (Oxford, 1989); Martin S. Navias, *Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning, 1955–1958* (Oxford, 1991); Ian Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain's Deterrent and America, 1957–1962* (Oxford, 1994); John Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1964* (Oxford, 1995); Richard Moore, *The Royal Navy and Nuclear Weapons* (London, 2001); Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London, 2002); Peter Hennessy, *Cabinets and the Bomb* (Oxford, 2007); Richard Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality: Britain, the United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1958–64* (Basingstoke, 2010); Peter Hennessy and James Jinks, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service since 1945* (London, 2015).
- 11 Arnold, 'A Letter from Oxford,' 214.

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offered further invaluable help with retrieving MoD materials for which I am extremely grateful, while Tony Wilson, a Chevaline veteran, was a source of both personal recollections of the project and leads to new MoD and AEA documents that I would otherwise have missed. At the FCO, Russell Pullen was similarly helpful in accessing some highly significant files, and John Walker of the Arms Control and Disarmament Unit has given eager encouragement throughout, as has Seb Cox at the MoD's Air Historical Branch. My work at the AWRE archives was facilitated by Lynn Stringer, while the late Kate Pyne, Aldermaston's resident historian, was a welcoming host on my initial visits.

My feel for the period was enhanced by a series of interviews I conducted with retired officials, defence scientists, and political figures, and it is sad to record that many have passed away since I had the enormous pleasure of meeting them: they included, Lord Armstrong, Tony Benn, David Boucher, Lord Carrington, Roy Dommett, John Freeman, Lord Healey, Peter Jones, Sir Ronald Mason, Steven Metcalf, Sir Richard Mottram, Sir Patrick Nairne, Sir David Omand, Lord Owen, Sir Michael Palliser, Frank Panton, Sir Charles Powell, Sir Michael Quinlan, Sir Peter Ramsbotham, Lord Rodgers, Sir Clive Rose, Sir Kevin Tebbit, and David Young.

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# Abbreviations for Volume II

ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
AC(P)	Assistant Controller (Polaris)
ACSA(N)	Assistant Chief Scientific Adviser (Nuclear)
AEA	Atomic Energy Authority
AEC	Atomic Energy Commission
ANF	Atlantic Nuclear Force
AWRE	Atomic Weapons Research Establishment
CA(P)	Chief Adviser (Projects)
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CDU	Christian Democratic Union
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CGWL	Controller of Guided Weapons and Electronics (Ministry of Supply/Ministry of Aviation/Ministry of Technology)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CNS	Chief of the Naval Staff
CPE	Chief Polaris Executive
CSA	Chief Scientific Adviser
DASO	Demonstration and Shakedown Operation
DAWD	Director of Atomic Warhead Development (Ministry of Supply/Ministry of Aviation)
DCA(PN)	Deputy Chief Adviser (Projects and Nuclear)
DCP	Development Cost Plan
DCQ	Deputy Controller Equipment (Ministry of Aviation/Ministry of Technology)
DEA	Department of Economic Affairs
DDRE	Director of Defense Research and Engineering (US Department of Defense)
DDW(P)	Deputy Director Weapons (Polaris)
DNW	Director of Naval Warfare
DPS	Defence Planning Staff

DSTI	Directorate of Scientific and Technical Intelligence
DUS(P)	Deputy Under Secretary (Policy)
EASAMS	Elliot Automation Space and Advanced Military Systems
EEC	European Economic Community
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FO	Foreign Office
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IRBM	Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile
JCAE	Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JIGSAW	Joint Inter-Services Group for the Study of All-Out War
JOWOG	Joint Working Group
JPS	Joint Planning Staff
JRSWG	Joint Re-entry System Working Group
JSTG	Joint Steering Task Group
LMSC	Lockheed Missiles and Space Company
MDA	Mutual Defence Agreement
MDS	Master Dispenser System
MinTech	Ministry of Technology
MIRV	Multiple Independently-Targetable Re-entry Vehicle
MLF	Multilateral Force
MoA	Ministry of Aviation
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MRBM	Medium Range Ballistic Missile
MRV	Multiple Re-entry Vehicle
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NPG	Nuclear Planning Group
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NRDC	Nuclear Requirements for Defence Committee
NSC	National Security Council
OPD	Overseas Policy and Defence Committee
OPD(O)	Overseas Policy and Defence (Official) Committee
ORC	Operational Requirements Committee
PA	Penetration Aid
PAC	Penetration Aid Carrier
PIPSC	Polaris Interdepartmental Policy Steering Committee
PN	Ministerial Committee on Nuclear Policy
PPAG	Polaris Performance Analysis Group
PPC	Polaris Policy Committee
PRESSG	Polaris Re-entry System Study Group
PSA	Polaris Sales Agreement
PUS	Permanent Under Secretary
PUSD	Permanent Under-Secretary's Department (Foreign Office)

QRA	Quick Reaction Alert
R & D	Research and Development
RAE	Royal Aircraft Establishment
RAF	Royal Air Force
REB	Re-entry Body
RES	Re-entry System
ROF	Royal Ordnance Factory
RRE	Royal Radar Establishment
RV	Re-entry Vehicle
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organization
SLBM	Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile
SPD	Social Democratic Party
SPO	Special Projects Office (US Navy)
SSBN	Nuclear-powered Ballistic Missile Submarine
SSPO	Strategic Systems Project Office (US Navy)
UN	United Nations
VCNS	Vice Chief of Naval Staff
WDC(NS)	Weapons Development Committee (Nuclear Sub-Committee)



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# 1 Labour in power

## The Atlantic Nuclear Force and the Polaris programme, October 1964–January 1965

### **Labour policy and the nuclear inheritance**

In October 1964, the month when British voters would go to the polls to elect a new Government, the UK's strategic nuclear forces, though dwarfed by those of the United States and the Soviet Union, nevertheless possessed considerable destructive potential. The Royal Air Force's Bomber Command, operating at exceptionally high levels of professionalism and skill, could muster nine Vulcan (72 aircraft), and four Victor squadrons (32 aircraft), all equipped with nuclear weapons of British manufacture. Three of the Vulcan and two of the Victor squadrons were armed with the Blue Steel stand-off missile, capable of delivering a one megaton warhead to its target from a range of about 100 miles; the rest of the force was still equipped with Yellow Sun free fall bombs, using the same one megaton Red Snow warhead as Blue Steel. Thirteen of the Vulcans and Victors were constantly kept at 15 minutes readiness to fly, and in a period of tension there were plans to disperse the V-force to 36 airfields across the UK, with the force able to take-off two minutes after an order was issued.

Since May 1963, as was seen in volume one of this history, the entire Vulcan and Victor force had been assigned to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) for targeting purposes, subject to the general proviso of the Anglo-American Nassau Agreement of December 1962 that it could be withdrawn when 'supreme national interests' were deemed at stake. Also assigned to SACEUR were four squadrons of Canberra light bombers (48 aircraft) based in Germany, and three squadrons of Valiants (24 aircraft) from the UK, all equipped with US nuclear weapons provided under dual-key arrangements (with eight Valiants and four Canberras also kept at a high state of readiness). The Valiants and Canberras remained under national command during peacetime. If war were to occur, SACEUR, as well as general authorisation from the Alliance, would require the specific agreement of the British Government before he could employ any of the UK nuclear forces that had been assigned to him. There was a general understanding between the US President and British Prime Minister that they would consult one another before any US or UK nuclear forces were ordered into use, and

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there was a specific agreement to making a 'joint decision' if a nuclear strike were to be made by US aircraft based in Britain or by the Valiants armed with US weapons.<sup>1</sup>

Under the sales agreement concluded by the Conservative Government in April 1963, preparations were already being made for the procurement from the United States of 97 of the advanced A3 version of the Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missile, as well as provision made for their logistic support. Scientists and engineers at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) at Aldermaston had been busy with the design of a new British primary for inclusion in an adaptation of the US Mark 58 thermonuclear warhead which would be employed in the A3's re-entry system. They were assisted in this work by the knowledge gained, and specialist materials supplied, under the terms of the Anglo-American 'Agreement on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes' (hereafter Mutual Defence Agreement, or MDA) first concluded in July 1958, then amended in May 1959. The ship-building firms Vickers-Armstrong and Cammell Laird were fully engaged with designing and constructing a new force of four nuclear-powered submarines, each able to carry 16 Polaris missiles. The demanding goal of introducing the first submarine into service by June 1968 having been set, keels for the first two boats had been laid in 1964, with a further two planned for 1965. In early 1964, with the keen support of the Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the Government had modified earlier plans and had placed an order for a fifth Polaris submarine. With a force of five boats it was expected that two could be kept on continuous station, and a third at a maximum period of notice of four days. In the confident tones of one Ministry of Defence official, 'as far as can be foreseen at present, Polaris submarines at sea will be as nearly invulnerable to pre-emptive attack as anything can be.' A national command and communications system, as then existed for the V-bomber force, was being devised to pass orders to the Polaris submarines, and so 'in practice ... a British Government could, if it so wished, order the use of its major nuclear weapons or prevent them being fired on the orders of any other authority.' Estimates of the destructive capability of the 104 V-bombers available for use in 1964 were put at 20 major Soviet cities, and a comparable capability was expected of the Polaris force when it was eventually deployed.<sup>2</sup>

The allocation of extra resources for construction of a fifth Polaris submarine came during a period when Opposition attacks on the Government's approach to spending on the nuclear deterrent were intensifying. Now firmly ensconced as leader of the Labour Party, Harold Wilson was keen to make the point that the preoccupation with nuclear independence, represented by the Polaris programme, was making it more difficult for the armed forces to meet Britain's world-wide military commitments, whether in defence of Malaysia (which since September 1963 had been embroiled in full-blown confrontation with Indonesia, with British forces engaged in repelling cross-border raids by Indonesian forces in Borneo), or in the South Arabian Federation (the home of Britain's key Middle East base of Aden, and where

insurgents were threatening the control of pro-Western rulers). During a Commons debate staged by the Labour Party in mid-January 1964, where an attempt was made to attack the Government for its neglect of conventional defence capabilities, Wilson had again affirmed that, 'Britain should cease the attempt to remain an independent nuclear power, since this neither strengthens the [NATO] alliance nor is it now a sensible use of our resources...' Proclaiming that 'our expenditure on the nuclear effort has had, and will have if it is continued, serious and limiting effects on our ability to build up adequate conventional forces,' he continued that the deterrent was 'wholly irrelevant to the problems the country is facing. One cannot use it in Cyprus or in Borneo. The Government are not going to drop it on the trade union leaders in South Arabia.' As well as its dubious utility in such low intensity military operations or against non-nuclear adversaries, Wilson voiced doubt that the Government would ever 'contemplate taking on Russia alone in a thermonuclear exchange. I should like to know their estimate of our second-strike capacity. There are not many first-rank military experts who think that we have very much. In their calculations, however, do the Government contemplate the possibility of a first-strike alone, without our allies?'

Wilson then quoted from a recent article by Sir John Slessor, where the former Chief of the Air Staff (and principal author of the Chiefs of Staff 1952 Global Strategy Paper) now expressed the view that all Polaris would offer would be 'the doubtful consolation of a posthumous revenge – devastating no doubt, but not lethal – after our country and the bulk of our population had been obliterated.' Referring to government statements extolling the importance of NATO for deterrence, Wilson pointed to the inconsistency of considering the UK deterrent as available for use in a situation where the United States had, in fact, refused involvement and 'we might have to use our nuclear weapons as a means of forcing America's hand – the so-called catalytic strike?' Wilson said that, knowing the Prime Minister, he would acquit him of 'anything so fundamentally evil as that proposal, or in that matter so self-defeating, because if the Americans have decided not to honour the alliance, I am not certain that they will be shamed into it by the fact that we have committed suicide first.' Nevertheless, the Government still talked in such terms, and so Wilson asked if it really believed that the United States would

supply Polaris for us to engage in a war to which the United States are opposed ... the Government's nuclear argument is based upon not trusting our allies, because they envisage a situation in which the United States desert us and default on the alliance. They think that they can bring the United States in by going it alone. I challenge the Prime Minister, when he meets the President of the United States, to ask him whether the idea of a catalytic strike to bring in an unwilling America is the President's interpretation of the Nassau Agreement. If it is not, the Government's whole case falls to the ground.

Instead, Wilson argued that the real reason for maintaining the deterrent was 'political', and rooted in the previous Prime Minister's need to return from Nassau with something to show for his efforts if he was not to be assailed by critical backbench opinion in the Conservative Party. What Wilson regarded as so 'pathetic' about Douglas-Home's position was that although he was 'far too intelligent' to believe in the arguments over independent use, 'he holds his place only by maintaining the fiction. Now he hopes to use this in addition, not merely as a weapon of intra-party warfare, but as a weapon of inter-party warfare in the General Election. In doing this, he is sadly underrating the intelligence of the electorate.' It was at Nassau, Wilson alleged, that the Government had also taken the unwise step of signing up to the controversial idea being pushed by the US administration in Washington, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, for establishing a Multilateral Force (MLF). A new force of 25 surface ships armed with 200 Polaris missiles under joint NATO control, with crews of mixed nationality, as envisaged by the MLF proposals, Wilson argued, would have 'serious, perhaps fatal, implications' for agreements with the Soviet Union over disarmament or non-proliferation. The Conservative Government's nuclear policy, in other words, was undermining its avowed foreign policy goals of reducing East-West tensions and creating the conditions for a safer international environment.<sup>3</sup>

Having urged the Government to take nuclear non-proliferation more seriously, Wilson also proceeded to explain Labour's policy. The V-bombers would be kept for the 'rest of their limited life – and that is not long now – and we shall keep them unequivocally assigned to NATO.' Over Polaris, and as had been made 'clear a hundred times', if Labour was returned to power it would aim to 'renegotiate the Nassau Agreement on the basis of our declared policy that our proper contribution to our Alliance and that our most effective military strength in this country is secured without the illusion which is created by nuclear missile carrying submarines.' Referring back to the January 1963 parliamentary debate after the Nassau Conference, Wilson re-stated his intention to 'denegotiate' the Agreement so as 'to end the proposal to buy Polaris submarines from the United States.'<sup>4</sup>

According to Alistair Hetherington, the editor of the *Guardian*, who held frequent private conversations with Wilson at this time, the Labour leader regarded the British bomb as essentially 'a bluff.' Wilson's views, moreover, had been confirmed when he had accompanied Philip de Zulueta, who had acted as Harold Macmillan's Principal Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs during the final years of Macmillan's premiership, on a flight to Washington for President Kennedy's funeral in November 1963. On this occasion de Zulueta 'had taken the line that it was damaging for Labour to show up the emptiness of Britain's nuclear boast. Wilson had said he didn't believe that Britain had either a first or a second strike capability,' and that the 'little value' there was in the deterrent should be used as a 'bargaining weapon...'<sup>5</sup> When it came to the prospect of Polaris, it should be called the 'Moss Bros deterrent' as 'we had to borrow it from America.'<sup>6</sup> Wilson also told

Hetherington that he 'shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that they hadn't had their contacts already with the chiefs of staff and the scientific advisers. The chiefs of staff were quite keen to talk to them, where it could be done discreetly.'<sup>7</sup>

Labour leaders were, it is clear, already reaching for some new conceptions of how the existing nuclear forces of the NATO Alliance could be reorganised, with the goal of circumventing the need for a new mixed-manned MLF, and move British nuclear policy away from its rhetorical commitment to independence and toward closer coordination with the US strategic deterrent. In early February 1964, Denis Healey, the Opposition defence spokesman, had discussed with Peter Thorneycroft, the Defence Secretary, the notion that pooling of the deterrent into some common Anglo-American force might afford the UK a greater voice in how the United States intended to use its own general strategic nuclear forces. This, however, was a proposition which the then Prime Minister, when he learnt of it, dismissed out of hand by recalling that Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, had told him 'that if they [i.e. the Labour Opposition] thought they could get a say in the use of the US deterrent it was pure bunk.'<sup>8</sup>

These were nevertheless indications that Healey was thinking in far larger terms than the MLF, and was looking toward solutions to the perennial conundrum of how NATO's nervous members could be reassured that Washington would be ready to commit its strategic nuclear forces in the event of a European conflict, when the Soviet Union was in a position (as it plainly was by the mid-1960s) to inflict its own devastating nuclear attacks against the US homeland in response. The bargain envisaged by Healey in 1964 was foregoing the 'independent' character of European strategic nuclear capabilities through their commitment to a new transatlantic control structure, in return for a more direct influence over the planning and possible use of US strategic nuclear forces in an Alliance context.<sup>9</sup> Such a move might also dissipate whatever goad to German nuclear ambitions was provided by the existence of an 'independent' deterrent in the UK, and obviate any need for the MLF, a scheme which senior figures in the US State Department still saw as essential in order to frustrate any nascent desires in Bonn to acquire national control over a nuclear weapons capability.

During the spring of 1964, Labour spokesmen became more outspoken in their opposition to the MLF, disabusing earlier impressions given by Patrick Gordon Walker, the shadow Foreign Secretary, that a Labour Government might be persuaded to join.<sup>10</sup> In early March, Wilson was giving speeches in the United States expressing vigorous opposition to the proposals.<sup>11</sup> The US trip had also included a meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House, where Wilson stressed Labour's commitment to the NATO Alliance, and that he wanted to play an active part supporting US efforts to maintain global security. A Labour Government would 'get rid of the national deterrent which made no sense at all for England today ... this would save 300 million pounds which could be used to put back the British

fleet on the high seas [sic], and would permit an increase in conventional forces so that the UK could play an active and useful role in putting out brush fires when necessary.’ The only way in which a Labour Government would support joining the MLF, Wilson told Johnson, was if it was the sole path to prevent Germany acquiring nuclear weapons, but he simply did not feel that German opinion was strongly in favour of the latter policy.<sup>12</sup> As was noted in the previous volume, Gordon Walker’s views were encapsulated for an American audience in an article he produced for the journal *Foreign Affairs* in April 1964. As well as avowing that he did not believe ‘Britain herself should seek to make or possess nuclear weapons of her own’, Gordon Walker nevertheless said that Labour would not immediately discard the V-bomber force. Instead, a Labour Government would seek a new Anglo-American agreement to replace Nassau, where a ‘real share’ could be enjoyed by the UK in policy toward such crucial areas as deployment and targeting of Alliance nuclear forces.<sup>13</sup> These new arrangements, it was clear, were seen as a direct substitute for the MLF, and a few weeks later Gordon Walker was reported to be warning the Americans that if they were counting on a future Labour Government’s support over the MLF they were making ‘a grave miscalculation.’<sup>14</sup>

In May 1964, Wilson explained to Hetherington that his priority with the Americans when assuming office would be to ‘achieve full joint targeting for nuclear forces and of the means whereby a “consensus” would be arrived at on the use of nuclear weapons in Europe. There must be a consensus both for the use of strategic and for the use of tactical weapons in Europe.’ As for the Johnson administration it wanted to ‘get them off the hook’ over both the MLF and the commitment to supply Polaris to the UK: ‘They had no wish to go ahead with either of these.’ From his defence sources Wilson also believed that the Achilles heel of Britain’s putative Polaris force would prove to be communications, as these would either have to be routed through American facilities or rely on the construction of large new transmitters in the UK which would be first thing to be a targeted in any Russian attack. ‘They’d also be vulnerable to jamming by the Americans,’ he had continued, ‘who would know all about our communications system and could, if they wished, therefore prevent independent British use of the Polaris submarines.’<sup>15</sup> In June 1964, Wilson reported that his adamant opposition to the MLF remained unchanged, and that he was convinced ‘that the Russians really weren’t prepared to contemplate any further steps in disarmament if the MLF went ahead. They regarded it as a breach of understandings on proliferation. It was giving a share in control of nuclear weapons to Germans and to others.’<sup>16</sup>

A fuller indication of Labour thinking at this time was given in an interview by Healey for the magazine *NATO’s Fifteen Nations* in the summer of 1964. In this Healey had underlined Labour’s opposition to the MLF scheme, as it was seen of doubtful military utility, very expensive, and only likely to exacerbate tensions within NATO as it would create new disputes

over the control mechanisms under which it would operate. He felt that a more immediate problem was the control of the existing armoury of nuclear weapons deployed around Western Europe, rather than arrangements for a new force. 'I believe that by offering to renounce national control of its own nuclear forces in favour of a new system of NATO control,' Healey had ventured, 'a Labour Government in Britain might succeed in shifting the focus of discussion away from the MLF towards a more relevant alternative proposal for collective control of all the alliance's existing weapons.' Labour, Healey affirmed, would 'cease attempting to maintain an independent British nuclear deterrent for both economic and political reasons.' Britain was highly unlikely to be faced with a general nuclear war where she would be standing alone, while the Conservative argument that an independent nuclear capability was required simply prompted similar aspirations from other non-nuclear European countries. Moreover, the costs associated with the deterrent took resources away from other areas of the defence expenditure which were crucial to fulfilling Britain's NATO and overseas roles. Healey would like to see, he professed, an approach whereby the European NATO powers were associated 'more closely with the planning and organisation of America's strategic retaliatory power so that if ever the President has to consider using it he will do so in a context of political and military thinking which Europeans have helped to frame.' He also envisaged a new arrangement in NATO for the collective control of the shorter range nuclear systems already deployed in Europe, including in this context Britain's V-bombers.<sup>17</sup>

Labour's election manifesto, published when the campaign began in mid-September 1964, had been highly critical of the Conservative commitment to buy Polaris from the United States, claiming that, 'It will not be independent and it will not be British and it will not deter.' There was, however, no commitment to dispense with the V-bomber force. Despite opposition to the MLF, there was also mention of the need for greater Alliance involvement in the deployment and control of nuclear weapons. During the election campaign, the Conservatives had stressed the continuing need for an independent nuclear deterrent and attacked Labour's stance over nuclear policy, stressing the inexperience of the Opposition front bench and divisions within the Labour Party as a whole. Douglas-Home, in particular, referred repeatedly to the nuclear issue in speeches and interviews, while Wilson steered clear as much as possible of a subject that had caused his predecessor such trouble with the party's grass roots. Held on 15 October, the election eventually saw Labour win a total of 317 seats (with a share of the popular vote not much greater than in 1959), enough to provide a slim overall majority of four in the Commons; in general terms, Labour's traditional support appears to have held up well in their electoral heartlands, while many Conservative voters either stayed at home, unenthused by Douglas-Home's leadership, or some even switched to the Liberals in key marginal seats. There was no conclusive verdict as to whether Labour's approach to the deterrent cost them votes in

1964, although opinion polls showed a majority favoured keeping nuclear weapons, and some of Wilson's later comments seem to indicate he thought it was a point of vulnerability in the party's platform.<sup>18</sup>

It was noted at the end of the previous volume that during the election campaign, the Chiefs of Staff (COS) had looked on Labour's policy pronouncements concerning the future of the deterrent with much anxiety, fearing that Harold Wilson's arrival as Prime Minister would instigate a rapid dismantling of this nuclear capability, and the cancellation of the Polaris programme. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), had proposed a confrontational scheme involving the presentation of a paper to an incoming Labour government which made plain the Chiefs' adamant opposition to any such course. This idea had, however, been overruled (in Mountbatten's temporary absence) by the other members of the COS Committee, and instead it was decided to draw up a factual paper on Britain's current strategic nuclear capability, along with arguments for why it should be maintained. Over a few days in early October, the Defence Planning Staff (as the Joint Planning Staff had been re-styled with the formation of a unified MoD earlier in the year) accordingly updated an earlier paper that had been prepared in December 1962, on the eve of the Nassau Conference, and received endorsement from the COS the day before the general election. The revised paper argued that the basic value of a UK capability was as an essential means of retaliation to the threat of direct nuclear attack by an adversary. In order to operate as a deterrent to such an attack, it was considered that a UK strategic nuclear force needed to meet three conditions:

- a They must be seen to be capable of inflicting more damage on the nuclear power envisaging such bombardment than it could accept as the price of nuclear attack on the United Kingdom.
- b They must be seen to be capable of inflicting this damage before, while, or after the United Kingdom was under nuclear bombardment.
- c They must be sovereign (independent) in the strictest military sense.

The second condition mandated a force which must be 'secure against pre-emptive enemy attack' combined with 'certainty in our potential enemies' minds as well as our own that a sufficient number of weapons will reach their targets.' It was not necessary for the equipment that formed the UK nuclear force to be British produced, the paper argued. But British ownership, manning, maintenance, and control were seen as crucial in satisfying the third condition of independence, so that final authority for use remained with the Government. The commitment of the force to NATO served to demonstrate 'that we have no deliberate "go it alone" policy. However, a "go it alone" capability remains and must always be an important consideration in the mind of any potential enemy.'

The paper also saw it as prudent to maintain such a strategic nuclear capability, despite the existence of the North Atlantic Alliance, as in the last

resort it might not be wise to place total reliance on the resolution of the United States to employ its own nuclear guarantee to defend vital British interests. The COS cautioned:

It is by no means certain that British, or indeed European, interests will remain coincidental with those of the United States in the future, and the French are clearly of the same opinion. In the past there have been no instances of automatic military support by the United States in the conditions leading to the outbreak of wars: indeed sometimes the reverse.

Moreover possession of a strategic nuclear capability, it was claimed, 'gives us a special influence in the councils of the world and in particular in our relationship with the United States.' The nuclear connection with the Americans offered many advantages, including diversification of methods of delivery and deployment, complicating the task of any common adversary; provision of intelligence 'possibly beyond our own means to acquire'; and the mutual benefits of an integrated missile early warning system. Dismissing the notion that unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons would aid the cause of non-proliferation, indeed, arguing that nuclear status was important to give Britain a leading voice in the international negotiations which might establish a non-proliferation regime, the paper concluded that, though there was no reason it should not be committed to any alliance of which the UK was a member, there was a continuing military requirement for a strategic nuclear capability under sovereign British control 'both to deter attack on this country and to preserve our world-wide freedom of action.'<sup>19</sup>

Much of this stood in marked contrast to the official position of the Labour Party. The Party's election manifesto, and Wilson personally, had publicly disowned the idea of a 'go it alone' nuclear targeting policy, while British dependence on the United States for the supply of Polaris, according to Labour's position, had undermined any previous assertions that Britain in fact possessed an 'independent' nuclear capability. Even the brief on the paper prepared for the new Permanent Under Secretary (PUS) at the Ministry of Defence, Sir Henry Hardman, by his staff in the Defence Secretariat was prepared to concede this latter point, when it highlighted the inconsistency between one of the main arguments for retaining the deterrent – that it provided an insurance against withdrawal of US support from backing vital UK interests if they were threatened by an adversary – and the reliance on the same US support for the maintenance of the capability. 'There is no absolutely convincing argument to get round this dilemma,' Hardman was advised. The basic belief that tended to be held was that though in theory the Americans might withdraw support for Polaris, and so make it much more problematic and expensive for the UK to retain its strategic nuclear capability, in practice it would prove difficult for them to renounce their obligations under the Nassau Agreement.<sup>20</sup>

Although his colleagues on the COS Committee had recommended against making a direct approach to the Government about nuclear policy in the immediate post-election period, Mountbatten contemplated taking matters into his own hands. On 19 October, as his official biographer recounts, Mountbatten composed (though it appears did not ultimately send) a personal letter to Wilson congratulating him on his election victory, and making the case for the retention of the UK's nuclear retaliatory capability. The part that the UK force played in the overall Western deterrent (which was itself the only counter then feasible to the overwhelming superiority of conventional Russian forces in Europe), the CDS had argued, was 'to dispel in Russian minds the thought that they will escape scot-free if by any chance the Americans decide to hold back release of a strategic nuclear response to an attack. Our Polaris force will be capable of inflicting on the Russian homeland damage which the most hard-headed gambler could not regard as anything but utterly unacceptable.'<sup>21</sup>

A fuller, more defensive draft statement of the COS's views on the need for the deterrent – to be presented, as Mountbatten had initially wished, as a last resort to Wilson if there was a protracted ministerial discussion about abandoning the nuclear deterrent – was also circulating within the MoD during this period. In the search for additional material, and as a primer for the key arguments in favour of retention, on 20 October Hardman sent a version of this to the Cabinet Secretary, as well as Zuckerman, Mountbatten and other senior officials. The statement, closely paralleling the private letter just composed by Mountbatten to Wilson, offered the view that the main containment of the military threat from the Soviet Union was based on the twin pillars of NATO, which sustained Western European morale and 'provides protection against a Russian military walkover,' and the West's strategic nuclear forces. From this it would seem that all that was required was to ensure that the deterrent power of the enormous arsenal of US nuclear weapons was extended to include Britain, and the NATO alliance was continued in being. However, 'unreal though they may be at present,' there were two dangers which had to be acknowledged. The first was a 'radical change of American policy, whether in the direction of isolation from Europe or in the direction of very violent and risky handling of relations with Russia.' The second came from 'the American concept of Europe as a possible battleground in which a Russian attack is to be defended by all methods short of a strategic nuclear exchange.' While it was realised it was 'a matter of political judgment whether the risk of any serious change in American policy is such that any insurance premium has to be paid against it,' there were 'plenty of recent signs that what we regard as the relatively sane East [Coast] is losing control of the destinies of the United States and there is no certainty what control by the "irrational" West may produce in future.' Regarding the second danger, the MoD paper pointed to the 'continued and insistent American planning and discussion of tactical nuclear warfare in North-West Europe [which] indicates to us an unhealthy belief that such warfare is conceivable. In some American minds it appears to be regarded as acceptable.'

To the MoD both dangers could over time erode the overall credibility of the deterrent, and underlined the importance of the European powers, and the UK in particular, of holding nuclear forces that could directly threaten the Soviet Union, and which could be launched without US sanction. Such a force must also be 'seen to be capable of inflicting more damage on Russia than she could accept, and capable of inflicting this damage even during or after a Russian nuclear bombardment'. Though admitting the dependence of the future UK Polaris force on supplies of US equipment and help with maintenance support, it would still be able to meet this requirement 'and acting even against American wishes.' A final point, presented almost as an afterthought, was that once Britain's strategic nuclear capability was renounced it would be a very long and costly process to rebuild it if international circumstances were to demand.<sup>22</sup>

Within the Foreign Office, the MoD's paper provoked several critical comments. One official noticed that the case for retention was built entirely on an unknowable reading of future American policy, and could equally well be used for justification for supporting a number of separate European nuclear deterrents, or for joining a multilateral European force. If the United States was considered so essentially unreliable, it was even suggested that the question should be raised of 'whether we are insuring with the right firm.' It might be better, it was felt, to rest the case for the retention of strategic nuclear weapons on the simple uncertainties of the wider international scene: 'No man can predict the future; and that, in the last resort, is the true argument (though it may not be a rational one) for going on with Polaris and trying to keep an independent deterrent.'<sup>23</sup>

Michael Palliser, the head of the newly-formed Foreign Office Planning Staff, concurred, finding the MoD's argument 'by far the least plausible justification there can be for this country retaining an independent nuclear capability.' If it were accepted, it had the potential for encouraging the destabilising development of a German nuclear capability, while there was also the problem that the contingency of independent British use, in conditions where United States support for Europe had been withdrawn, was so improbable. As Palliser put it,

If a situation is reached in which the United States has washed its hands of European defence, we must surely assume that the United States has also implicitly if not explicitly made it clear to the Russians that America is no longer concerned about the fate of Western Europe. If, in these circumstances, Russia decided to take over Western Europe I personally do not believe that a single European statesman, British or otherwise, would be willing to risk national suicide by threatening to use nuclear deterrents against the Soviet Union; and, what is more important, even if I am wrong, I do not think that the Russians would believe this. Since the only purpose of the deterrent would be to deter the Russians, it would have failed. I think this would be more particularly the case if the

Russians made it clear in any military adventures they undertook that they intended to confine themselves to conventional weapons and only to use nuclear weapons if the latter were used against them first. This may seem a rather craven approach; but if we in fact reached a situation of such total Western disintegration as the Ministry of Defence's thesis implies, I very much doubt that there would be the strength of purpose in Europe to carry out the suicidal policy implicit in it.

The MoD also appeared, as far as Palliser could see, to have given up on any idea of controlling the spread of national deterrents. This he held as an example of a 'needless fatalism [at] the prospect of inevitable Armageddon.' The problem for Britain, in Palliser's view, was that it was 'difficult and dangerous' to give up its nuclear capability as long as France remained a strategic nuclear power. However, under de Gaulle's successor there might be some prospect of bringing the French into an Atlantic nuclear force to which Britain had committed her own nuclear weapons, and with which Germany was closely associated. This, however, was all an issue 'of negotiation and timing', and in the meantime Britain, Palliser thought, should retain her independent nuclear capability while accepting the principle of participation in such an Atlantic force.<sup>24</sup>

In the event, the PUS at the Foreign Office, Sir Harold Caccia, wrote to Hardman to commend him – in diplomatic fashion – for what he called an 'excellent and succinct paper.' The only mild criticism offered by Caccia was that it tended to concentrate over-much on the situation in Europe, and neglected the wider international scene, including the Far East; his basic feeling, he concluded was that 'our nuclear capability must count considerably throughout the world.'<sup>25</sup> However, reflecting more general Foreign Office feeling, at the same time Caccia informed the Cabinet Secretary that questions of nuclear policy could not really be separated from issues of overall defence policy, and that he assumed 'that at some fairly early stage there should be some joint examination to see whether we could reach an agreed view to put to Ministers over the whole range of nuclear problems or even over the whole field of defence policy, including the nuclear.'<sup>26</sup> As we shall see, it would be some time before the MoD and Foreign Office came together to try to resolve their differences over the fundamentals of nuclear policy.

In retrospect the MoD paper appears a curious document. At one point it evoked the prospect of 'irrational' political forces, with their origins in 'the West' of the US (perhaps 'Midwest' was intended?) capturing control of the Washington government, in an unusual and speculative exercise in political sociology (one Foreign Office official rightly commented that 'the implication ... that all Americans are mad but the East Coast less mad than some – is grotesque.')<sup>27</sup> What was plainly visible in MoD views, however, were the lingering effects of the Athens speech delivered to the NATO Council by the US Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, in May 1962, when he laid

out a picture of controlled nuclear strikes, and ideas of a graduated or flexible response to Soviet aggression in Europe, where one aim was to limit the pressures for escalation which had previously been regarded as irresistible. Though this approach possessed a certain logic when it came to reducing the risks of a clash of conventional forces in Europe generating a strategic nuclear exchange, which could only result in a calamitous loss of life for all societies unfortunate enough to be caught up in its effects, for a European audience it gave the impression that nuclear strikes might be limited to their continent alone, leaving the Superpowers relatively unscathed. This potential reduction in the 'delicate balance of terror' was hardly to be welcomed if it also effectively reduced the perception of the risks of aggression entertained by the Soviet leadership. The possession of a European finger on the strategic nuclear trigger, in the MoD's estimation, at least might complicate Soviet calculations, and give them extra cause for pause if they ever thought to employ conventional military force in a European setting.

The need for such a paper was, however, premature as the new Prime Minister had no intention of quickly dispensing with Britain's nuclear capability. While he remained deeply sceptical about claims for how Britain's strategic nuclear weapons might ever be employed in an 'independent' fashion, and had been a sharp critic of the dependence on US sources of supply that adoption of Polaris had involved, Wilson was also acutely aware that the UK capability had a political function in the Western Alliance that gave it valuable bargaining potential. Wilson was above all flexible over nuclear policy, determined to finesse the tensions within his own Party's ranks that nuclear issues tended to raise.<sup>28</sup> Amongst his colleagues there was certainly a degree of respect and admiration for Wilson's adept political skills, mastery of detail, and formidable intellectual energy, but this was often also complemented with profound distrust, and a lingering belief that Wilson, despite his earlier reputation as coming from the Left of the party, had no real political convictions or principles. To Wilson, as he later recalled, the 'best style of government is like rowing – the ideal solution is to get the boat along as quickly as possible without turning it over.'<sup>29</sup>

As Prime Minister after October 1964, Wilson continued to be surrounded by actual or potential rivals, including George Brown, whom he made First Secretary of State and head of a new Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), and James Callaghan, who became Chancellor (thus putting the two men who had stood against him for the party leadership in February 1963 in departments which were soon at loggerheads over control of the economy). Gordon Walker, another figure from the right of the party and a confirmed Atlanticist, who placed preservation of strong Anglo-American relations at the centre of his thinking, took over at the Foreign Office. One of the few Labour ministers to have previous experience of sitting in Cabinet under Attlee, Gordon Walker had been an effective if stolid shadow foreign affairs spokesman in the period before the election, but at the October poll had been defeated in notorious fashion in his Smethwick constituency, making

his position precarious unless he could find a quick and easy route back into the Commons. Described as a 'donnish, quiet, acquiescent figure', Gordon Walker had in any case been chosen for the Foreign Office by Wilson to both block any suggestion that Brown might take the position, and so that Wilson himself could exercise predominant influence over foreign policy.<sup>30</sup>

That the balance of the Government lay with the right of the party was confirmed by the unsurprising selection of Healey as Secretary of State for Defence. Having been an active participant in many of the intellectual debates over defence policy and nuclear strategy during the latter 1950s (which also made him a known and respected figure in US defence policy circles), Healey was possessed of a powerful mind, supreme confidence in his own abilities, and a combative (and often abrasive) personality.<sup>31</sup> Under the Conservatives, in the decade before 1964, there had been seven different ministers of defence, but Healey was to remain at the MoD for the entire span of the Labour Government until its defeat at the general election of June 1970. Over those five and a half years, Healey would come to dominate his department. With his impressive command of the predicaments facing a defence budget under immense pressure from the Treasury for cuts, his appreciation of the tensions within the NATO Alliance, the respect in which he was held by his American counterparts, and his clear grasp of strategic issues and deterrence theory, there can have been few politicians better equipped to lead the MoD as Britain's world power role contracted. Although he admired the Prime Minister's command of issues and driving personality, Healey had no great liking for Wilson, and their relationship was guarded and distant (although was helped by the fact that Healey had no strong political base in the party, which ruled him out as a potential rival, at least in the early years of the government).

Healey would take over a department that was still adapting to the new organisational arrangements that accompanied the centralisation of defence policymaking and administration first announced by the White Paper reforms of 1963. This important development did not mean, however, that traditional inter-service rivalries and tensions were consigned to past memory. Indeed, there was still ample room for competition between the services – whose separate central staffs survived the reorganisation carried out in 1964 – for increasingly scarce resources as budgets were squeezed and Britain's withdrawal from formal defence commitments in Asia and the Middle East accelerated over the next few years. The task of bringing about a greater degree of coordination between these different staffs was given to a bolstered central Defence Secretariat sitting within the Permanent Under-Secretary's office. With the new PUS – Hardman having taken over from Sir Robert Scott earlier in 1964 – holding much greater responsibilities over budgetary matters, and the secretariat now prepared to take a lead in such areas as nuclear policy, a central MoD voice in defence policy certainly became more pronounced. Improved defence financial planning against a ten year horizon became the norm under the new dispensation.

However, these changes did not mean that control or coordination were necessarily easier. For example, the CDS, while still responsible for presenting the collective view of the COS to the Secretary of State, 'depended on the service chiefs for advice and co-operation.'<sup>32</sup> Particularly after Mountbatten was retired from the CDS role in July 1965, it was rare for its occupant to express an independent view, not least as he lacked a dedicated planning staff to examine particular issues (after 1964, the Defence Planning Staff, consisting of separate service representatives, continued to serve the COS Committee rather than the CDS in his personal capacity). The tendency of the Navy, Air Force and Army Departments, as they were now called, was to regard the sum of their separate demands for resources as the requirement to be met by the overall defence budget, rather than to work backwards from an agreed view of defence requirements as a whole.

One area of activity where rationalisation was effectively achieved after 1964, nevertheless, was in the important area of defence intelligence, where the old service intelligence staffs were replaced by a single Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS). The DIS also took under its wing technical and scientific intelligence, so that the old Joint Intelligence Bureau organisation was dissolved, with its Director of Scientific and Technical Intelligence, Archie Potts, moving into the new DIS set-up. It was from this new dispensation that evaluation and analysis of Soviet nuclear and anti-ballistic missile (ABM) capability were expected, which in turn influenced the overall assessments compiled within the Cabinet Office by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).

In his own efforts to better coordinate the control of foreign and defence policy, the new Prime Minister would benefit from the Cabinet Office-run Overseas Policy and Defence (OPD) Committee machinery, which now a year old, was running very smoothly.<sup>33</sup> But Wilson also preferred dealing with substantial and discrete matters of high policy within an even smaller conclave of his senior ministerial colleagues, and his premiership was to become notable for its 'explosion' in the number of ad hoc Cabinet committees in the MISC series.<sup>34</sup> Overseeing the policymaking process, and standing at the centre of the official side of government remained Sir Burke Trend, the Cabinet Secretary. Trend had served Sir Norman Brook as Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet in the late 1950s, was a Second Secretary of the Treasury from 1959 to 1962, and in January 1963 had succeeded Brook in the top position. Subtle in thought, possessed of an intimidating wealth of experience and knowledge, and an unruffled and self-effacing manner, Trend came into his own during the numerous crises that were to afflict the government after October 1964. Providing advice on a huge array of subjects, Trend's minutes for the Prime Minister would convey in almost Socratic fashion the ebb and flow of the arguments over defence, foreign policy and nuclear issues with which he usually took an active interest and involvement. He was soon to form a close working partnership with Wilson, who thought Trend the finest civil servant he had known.<sup>35</sup>

On nuclear matters Trend would come to lean on the advice of Sir Solly Zuckerman, who found his way closer to Downing Street and the Cabinet Office after Labour took power. Zuckerman had first met Harold Wilson just after the war, and experienced his administrative abilities when Wilson had been President of the Board of Trade in the Attlee Government and Zuckerman had served on the National Resources Committee as a member of the Advisory Council on Scientific Policy.<sup>36</sup> Very soon after Labour's election victory, Wilson had made contact with Zuckerman and asked him to serve in the new Government, with the offer of joining the Lords as a Foreign Office minister with special responsibilities for disarmament. Not wanting to enter a 'political' career, Zuckerman had, however, declined saying that he wanted to continue with the current wide 'official' brief as Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) at the MoD he had held since 1960, including the tendering of advice directly to the Prime Minister when appropriate. If this was considered unsuitable, he would have to leave government service altogether and return to academic life. Faced with Zuckerman's *demarche*, Wilson instead offered him the role of Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government as a whole, with responsibilities to the Foreign Secretary in the area of disarmament, while he was also to retain his existing CSA title at the MoD.<sup>37</sup>

Trying to underline the Government's serious intentions in the disarmament and non-proliferation area, in early November 1964 Wilson moved to appoint Alun Gwynne Jones, the defence correspondent of *The Times*, as a new Minister of State for Disarmament at the Foreign Office (who became Lord Chalfont when he assumed his new responsibilities). Over the next two and a half years, Chalfont and Zuckerman were to form a discreet Whitehall axis as they moved to challenge the MoD's plans for its future nuclear programme and argue for a more positive approach to disarmament issues.<sup>38</sup> Zuckerman himself continued to occupy his twin briefs at the MoD and Cabinet Office, but with steadily increasing discomfort for all concerned. While appreciating the unconventional qualities of someone who 'could always be relied on to think outside the ruts in which the rest of us were too often stuck', Healey soon came to distrust his own CSA as lacking in collegiality and loyalty, and prone to shifting his position with alarming frequency.<sup>39</sup> Their estrangement over some of the difficult decisions of defence policy over the next year, as we shall see, would contribute to Zuckerman's subsequent departure from the MoD in 1966.

A central issue that would have to be faced by the new Government in its first few months in office was the need to control the steadily rising trends in defence expenditure, a critical problem over which its Conservative predecessor had prevaricated during the eighteen months before the election.<sup>40</sup> When Labour assumed office in October 1964 defence spending constituted about seven per cent of Gross National Product, a far higher figure than that of Britain's European competitors. It was widely recognised that the strain on the public purse of the overseas expenditure that this involved was unsustainable. Forecasts for that year's balance of payments deficit soon rose to an

alarmingly high £800 million, and a run on the pound followed the production of Callaghan's first budget statement on 11 November. This in turn necessitated resort to a rescue package from other European central banks, underlining the monetary weakness of the new Government as it set its face firmly against devaluation.<sup>41</sup>

Officials tended to identify the three major defence roles assumed by Britain as a leading member of the Western Alliance, with all the force commitments to NATO in the European theatre this entailed; the maintenance of a nuclear capability; and the UK's world-wide defence commitments. The latter set of responsibilities had long been seen as the most obvious arena for making savings, yet untangling the specific route through which these might be achieved was very far from clear. Britain was committed by treaty to several international alliances, had numerous bilateral defence agreements, and obligations to dependent territories stretching across the Caribbean, to Africa, the Middle East, Indian Ocean, and South East Asia (and where in the latter theatre large numbers of British forces had been actively engaged since 1963 in the defence of Malaysia against the threat of insurgency and subversion from Indonesia).<sup>42</sup> There were also pressures from Washington for Britain to retain her world-wide military role, not least as the Americans feared that they might have to fill any vacuum that might be left after British departure. On the part of some leading Labour figures, moreover, and most notably the Prime Minister himself, there was an initial attachment to what became known as the east of Suez role, as the area of important Commonwealth ties, and where local and regional instability was most likely in the decade to come. In a famous speech delivered at the Guildhall in London in November 1964, Wilson gave this sentiment its clearest expression when he declared, 'We are a world power and a world influence or we are nothing.'<sup>43</sup>

Notwithstanding such high-flying rhetoric, the difficulties besetting the domestic economy, and the need to find reductions in defence spending could not be ignored. The problem was underlined by the fact that the trends in future spending were all upward: defence expenditure for 1965/66 was estimated at £2,141 million, but this was anticipated to rise to £2,400 million by 1969/70, with over ten per cent of these totals made up of direct overseas expenditure, and so representing a significant strain on the balance of payments position.<sup>44</sup> Before the election Trend had, in fact, already begun a major survey of the scope for cutting overseas commitments, and maintaining global influence through other means than military presence, when in May 1964 he had formed the Long Term Study Group of inter-departmental officials, as an off-shoot of the Overseas Policy and Defence (Official) Committee. As was noted in the previous volume, Douglas-Home had expressly told Trend at this time that *Polaris* cancellation was not an option the group should consider. Its deliberations had, moreover, been marked by the Foreign Office's unwillingness to withdraw from Britain's world role, citing greater instability and a deterioration in Anglo-American relations as likely results.

Despite this, senior officials were forced to the conclusion that indefinite maintenance of the key east of Suez bases at Aden and Singapore should not be taken for granted. After much debate, the group delivered its report four days before the general election.<sup>45</sup>

### **The future of Polaris and the Atlantic Nuclear Force proposals**

In the area of nuclear policy, the two most pressing issues to be confronted by the Labour Government in its first few months in office were the future of the Polaris programme and how to respond to the new impetus that the Johnson administration in Washington sought to give the scheme to create an MLF. Plans for an MLF had moved forward at a glacial pace during 1964, as its prospective NATO members discussed the intricacies of its possible control mechanisms, financing and composition (including the all-important matter of maintenance of a US veto over any employment of the force) at the periodic meetings of a Paris-based working group. During this process, deeply sceptical British officials raised issue after issue in an ill-concealed attempt to talk the proposal into the ground and scupper it through practical objections. But at a political level, the MLF still had strong advocates in both the US State Department and within the West German Government, as the best solution to the Alliance's long-debated nuclear sharing problem. The MLF had reared its head again during the general election campaign as the German Chancellor, Ludwig Erhard, had recently begun to press the Americans to proceed with the MLF, at least initially, on a bilateral basis, with its basic Charter to be signed by December. To compound the problem, Erhard had made his bilateral proposal public on 6 October.<sup>46</sup>

Still wanting to involve as many other NATO members in the scheme as possible, President Johnson hoped to secure Wilson's early support for the MLF despite the fact that Labour had exhibited such hostility to it while in Opposition. It was apparent to all sides that the MLF proposals and Labour's position regarding the UK Polaris programme were interlinked, as what was soon to emerge as Labour's preferred alternative to the MLF – an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) – would require some form of substantial UK contribution, with Polaris submarines being the most plausible offering that could be made.

The initial weeks of the Labour Government therefore featured extensive discussions between senior ministers over how to put forward new proposals for Alliance nuclear policy which might supersede the unacceptable scheme for a mixed-manned MLF and reconcile this with their previous criticisms of notions of UK nuclear 'independence'. Five days after the election, Healey met Hardman and other senior officials at the MoD to consider the briefing that should be given to the Foreign Secretary regarding the MLF before his first visit to Washington. According to Healey's Private Secretary, Arthur Hockaday, it was agreed that Gordon Walker should be

encouraged to play for time, and if anything to make discouraging noises. He can very legitimately say both that the new administration will need time to study and make up its mind upon this very difficult question, and that in any case it will be sensible for the Working Group in Paris to complete its deliberation.

Moreover, the new Foreign Secretary would 'probably wish to take the line that there could be question of commitment until the question of control has been fully brought out and argued through.' As regards Polaris, Healey's view was that, as part of the MLF negotiations, 'we may well wish to bargain for a greater share of control of the total nuclear power available to the Alliance', but the Defence Secretary would be 'unwilling to give away any cards before the proper bargaining begins.' As Hockaday understood it, Healey felt that it might

be difficult for us to avoid involvement in some sort of multilateral force, which might not, however, necessarily be based on mixed manning. You regard the most important aims as the achievement of satisfactory veto arrangements, and the avoidance of excessive additional cost. You wondered whether it might be possible for us to put in first our V-bombers, and subsequently our Polaris submarines, without any emphasis on a right of withdrawal, in the hope of securing a greater share in Alliance [nuclear] planning. You envisage, however, a number of other possible solutions to the Polaris problem (including the possibility of switching to Hunter Killers) and your main concern is that the Foreign Secretary should not get [out] on a limb at this stage.<sup>47</sup>

The following day Healey discussed defence policy and Anglo-American relations with the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Harlech (as the former Sir David Ormsby Gore was now titled), who was visiting London. Professing no enthusiasm whatsoever for a mixed-manned surface fleet, Healey told the Ambassador that he 'wondered whether a different sort of MLF might be evolved to which we would contribute our V-bombers (and our Polaris submarines if we decided to go through with the programme) on a nationally manned basis but without emphasis on any right of independent withdrawal.' Moreover, he would 'not at this stage wish to get involved in whether we might also take a small part in some experiment in mixed manning.' In order to secure a British right of veto over any new force, however, Healey thought that a sizeable contribution would need to be made. Were the new Government to cancel the Polaris programme altogether, the Ambassador reported, Robert McNamara, the US Defense Secretary, had informed him there would be 'no ill-feeling in the United States', but Harlech thought there would 'probably be mixed feelings if we dropped out of the future deterrent business. They wanted to keep open the maximum number of options.'<sup>48</sup>

The lethargic discussions over the detailed (and hypothetical) arrangements for the MLF, held in the Paris working group since October 1963, had been led on the British side by Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh, the experienced Foreign Office official who served as the UK's Permanent Representative to NATO. Now, meeting with Healey, Shuckburgh told the new Defence Secretary that he had come to the conclusion that, as he put it, the 'real requirement was not for a new military force, but a new political superstructure.' A new treaty or agreement between MLF members could set up a new system 'embracing national as well as mixed-manned forces. The aim would be to bind the allies by commitments rather than by institutional measures such as joint manning and joint ownership'. Expressing resentment over recent suggestions that the US and Germany might proceed alone with nuclear sharing arrangements, Healey ventured that 'the key issue was how the MLF was to be controlled, and the new Government would oppose any scheme for which the control arrangements were not firmly agreed beforehand.' Retention of a veto was therefore seen as a crucial requirement for the UK, and this was something, Healey thought, which could be secured by a large contribution to the force. Hoping to dispel any suspicion that the Government might be anti-German in outlook, he had in mind including in any new arrangements the UK's entire nuclear capacity in Europe. He was clear that the Government must make a substantial contribution – possibly including 'all our residual nuclear capacity in Europe, both strategic and tactical' – toward resolving the nuclear sharing problem, while the solution had to 'involve the grouping of physical assets. The problem could not be solved only by tinkering with institutions.'<sup>49</sup>

One of Healey's first acts as Secretary of State had been to ask the Navy Department to give the case for building a Polaris force of five submarines. This was duly furnished by the First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), Admiral Sir David Luce, on 19 October with a note which explained that if the purpose of the Polaris force was to pose 'a credible independently-controlled national deterrent, it is necessary to provide a constant capability of inflicting, by nuclear weapon retaliation, an unacceptable level of destruction on the Soviet Union.' Such destructive capability had been 'the subject of reassessment from time to time by the Joint Intelligence Committee,' and the current plan was for the Polaris force to have a comparable capability to the V-bomber force, equating to the capacity to destroy 20 Soviet cities. This required 32 missiles to be at a constant state of readiness to fire, meaning that two boats to be at sea at all times, which mandated a five boat force. A five boat force also offered a margin against accidents.<sup>50</sup> Official Labour policy was not, however, directed toward the maintenance of an 'independently-controlled national deterrent', as the CNS's paper had put it, but to 'renegotiate' the Nassau agreement in the context of negotiations over the future nuclear arrangements of the Alliance.

In fact, at this early stage of his tenure at the MoD, Healey was interested in examining the possibility of reducing the force to only three boats, all of which might be assigned to the prospective ANF, and wanted to know if

this would be enough to keep one submarine on continuous station. Not surprisingly, the Navy Department was adamantly opposed to any such notion. The CNS had to explain in a minute for the Defence Secretary in early November that, though it could almost be achieved, a three boat squadron would not allow one submarine to be kept on constant patrol, and would place a huge strain on the support, refitting, and maintenance services which would have to be provided. Operating cycles would be exceptionally tight with only three boats, and the CNS was at pains to stress the hazards which might lie ahead if this course were adopted: 'we shall be in strait jacket without any days, let alone weeks, to spare. Things just don't work out this way. It will not just be accidents which will break the cycle – it will be wearing out or dislocation to the machinery from time to time, however good the workmanship and maintenance.' In theory, however, four boats meant 1.7 boats on station at all times, and with five this figure rose to 2.1, but 'practically,' he advised, 'we need four to keep one boat on patrol with any measure of certainty, and with five we should have a good chance of two.'<sup>51</sup>

At his first meeting of the Defence Council, notionally the highest policy-making body in the newly unified MoD, held at the end of October, Healey gave a full exposition of his attitudes toward the UK's nuclear capabilities.

'The independence of our deterrent,' the Defence Secretary explained, 'was not the main concern but, once the United Kingdom had become a nuclear power, it could not turn its back on nuclear power. The important thing was the use we made of our nuclear capacity to bargain with our allies and to overcome strains within the alliance. He was pleased to know that his views on the MLF appeared to be shared by the whole Ministry of Defence. He regarded it as militarily unnecessary, economically wasteful and politically dangerous. Hence the need for alternatives. The important thing was to use our key position as a nuclear power to shift the argument away from "mixed manning" towards allied influence (if not control) over the total nuclear resources of the alliance.'

Over Polaris, Healey saw it 'as a key element in our bargaining with our American and European allies.' The Government, he was convinced, 'should give no hint of abandoning it until our negotiations with the United States [over nuclear sharing] were complete. He was not impressed by the military relevance of Polaris, but he saw that it had a psychological value and was relatively cheap and long-lived. The Government was unlikely to decide to abandon it but might use variations in the time-scale or numbers as bargaining counters.'<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, Wilson himself was busy formulating his own notions of how Polaris might be used as a component in the Government's new proposals for the nuclear organisation of the North Atlantic Alliance. Obviously revelling in his position as Prime Minister, Wilson had received Hetherington for a

private talk in the Cabinet Room on the afternoon of 22 October. Here he mentioned an idea for handling the Polaris issue:

The Conservatives' case for keeping it was in essence that the Americans could not be relied on to stay in the Alliance. This had suggested to him a way out. If we assigned our Polaris submarines irrevocably to the Alliance, then it was not proliferation. If, however, the worst should ever happen and the Americans withdrew from NATO, then NATO would no longer exist, and our Polaris submarines would revert to us. In fact, then we'd have our deterrent in the way the Conservatives wanted.

Hetherington made the point that the word 'irrevocable could never have this meaning anyway.' Wilson's reply was 'no, that was precisely the point; but he thought that this was the way to get over both objections.'<sup>53</sup> That same evening Gordon Walker spent time at Wilson's house, where the latter apparently 'proposed that we might think of committing our Polaris submarines absolutely to the Atlantic alliance.'<sup>54</sup>

The following morning, *The Times* carried a story, compiled by Alun Gwynne Jones, the newspaper's defence correspondent, which revealed that new proposals were being formulated by the Government for taking part in a multilateral force, including the possibilities of mixed manning of V-bombers, allocating Polaris submarines to a new Allied nuclear command, and 'important modifications in the proposed organisation and control arrangements of the force.' At the same time, there was said to be no change in the Government's view that the MLF's mixed-manned surface fleet component was a 'militarily unnecessary device that would continue the proliferation of nuclear weapons and upset the strategic balance by giving west Germany a disproportionate influence in nuclear control.' Alternative British ideas for the collective planning and control of a force based on national contingents, it was suggested, might be based on a double veto system, where the use of the force could be vetoed either by the United States, or by the European members of the command on a collective basis. 'Those who take a realistic view of alliance arrangements,' it was observed, 'point out that if the British Polaris force were to be assigned in this way to a multilateral force, it would always be physically possible, if not politically feasible, to withdraw it as a last resort.' The article also alluded to divisions within official opinion, the COS being seen as unalterably hostile to a surface ship MLF component, but the Foreign Office concerned not to affront American sensibilities, with Britain potentially left aside while the force was brought into being by more willing participants. 'There is little doubt in the Government that nothing less than the future of Anglo-American relations is at stake in this issue,' the article concluded, while ministers felt that 'if Britain is ready to move half way along the path of multilateral control the United States should be prepared to come the rest of the way, even if it means substantial modification to the original MLF proposals.'<sup>55</sup>

Although Wilson claimed that the appearance of the article in *The Times* was a mere coincidence, Gordon Walker himself suspected it had been carefully planted, and that George Wigg, Wilson's close confidant on defence and security matters, was the source (shortly after, moreover, Gwynne Jones would join the Government as Lord Chalfont).<sup>56</sup> Almost a month later, Wilson told Hetherington that he had actually dreamt up the idea of assigning British nuclear forces to the Alliance in his bath during the election campaign; he saw this as having the effect of maintaining the clause in the Nassau Agreement on the assignment of Polaris to NATO, but discarding 'the clause on which Macmillan had been so insistent about the right to withdraw our forces.' If, however, the 'Americans withdrew from NATO, or there appeared to be a risk the Americans were not going to back NATO, then NATO, in any event, ceased to have any meaningful existence. In that event, of course, the British contribution would revert to British control.' However, Wilson himself preferred not to discuss such 'fallback positions' or contingencies at all.<sup>57</sup>

Armed with such ideas, Gordon Walker had travelled to Washington on 26 October to share the new Government's thinking with its closest ally. Laying out the doubts which were current in London about the MLF to State Department officials, the Foreign Secretary was also keen to stress that in asking for more time to consider the position, ministers were 'not resorting to stalling tactics', but that the Government would be 'gravely concerned' if the US and Germany alone were to proceed with the scheme. The basic problem, he noted, was to give the NATO allies 'a sense of sharing with the US in nuclear weapons,' hence he thought that a mixed-manned force should be 'part of some larger concern.' He then proceeded to offer a provisional outline of an 'Atlantic Nuclear Force':

It would comprise the British V bomber force, such Polaris submarines as HMG decide to proceed with, an equal number of US Polaris, a mixed manned element on the lines of the present MLF and possibly some Minutemen which might also be mixed manned.

The British contribution would be committed absolutely so long as the Alliance lasted. The condition in Nassau about withdrawal should supreme national interests be at stake would be abandoned so far as the British element of the new force was concerned.

There should be a US and UK veto on all elements in the force. Those participating in the mixed manned element(s) would likewise have a veto.

It was very important that targetting of the new force should be coordinated with that of all US forces in the Atlantic area.

To the Foreign Secretary, the proposals got away from the idea of a European nuclear force, and if they gave the Europeans a share in overall Western nuclear planning would be more attractive than the MLF.

Although Britain would not be taking part in the mixed manned surface fleet element,' Gordon Walker continued, 'they would be contributing to the wider force and would have no nuclear forces in the Atlantic area other than those in the new force. They would thus be on the same footing as the Germans; and the only conceivable way in which Britain might contemplate using their nuclear weapons regardless of the Alliance would be if the latter collapsed.

Despite some State Department reservations over the British not joining the mixed manned element of a force, for his part Rusk seemed eager to pursue the new ideas further, and there was appreciation that the new Government was trying to put forward constructive solutions to the nuclear sharing problem.<sup>58</sup>

After what had seemed a positive start, on his second day of his talks in the US capital, Gordon Walker received a frostier response to his ANF proposals. As during previous discussions with the British, it was George Ball, the Under Secretary of State, and the main advocate on the US side for the creation of the MLF, who put forward the wider political perspectives that underlay the whole scheme. If nothing was done to satisfy Bonn, Ball agreed with Gordon Walker's privately-expressed fears that the Germans 'might be seduced into some Franco-German nuclear arrangement. [Ball] confessed that there was no ideal solution; progress in politics was behind that in technology. But he thought that from the German point of view the UK must make a substantial contribution of manpower to the MLF.' It had been a consistent aim of US policy to tie Germany into the West, but this could not, Ball argued, be achieved

by bilateral arrangements such as the Franco-German treaty [of 1963]. There had to be some Atlantic arrangement. The MLF was directed primarily at solving the German problem and at the heart of it lay the need to eliminate any sense of German grievance or discrimination. The other main purpose of the MLF was to assist towards the greater unity of the Atlantic world, a tendency which it was all the more necessary to foster since Gaullism was working in the opposite direction.

Ball then proceeded to list the shortcomings of the latest British ideas, including the point that an allocation of Polaris submarines would not be enough: 'it was desirable that the UK should also participate substantially in the mixed-manned multilateral force, so that the Germans did not feel that this was not something which the UK considered good enough for the Germans but not good enough for them.'

Ball was interested in hearing the nature of British objections to the MLF, to which the Foreign Secretary replied that the scheme would not satisfy German ambitions in the long run. Gordon Walker also raised the matter of costs saying that the UK could not afford both its Polaris submarines and a

contribution to the surface ship element of an MLF. This opened up the chance for McGeorge Bundy, the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, to ask in pointed fashion 'which the UK Government would prefer if it had to make a choice: acquiring Polaris submarines or a share in the MLF.' Facing this awkward question, Gordon Walker argued that British objectives of creating a viable ANF, including a matching US contribution of Polaris submarines, would be better served through the creation of a UK Polaris force. Nevertheless, bowing to concerted pressure, Gordon Walker's stance eventually weakened when he said that if the Americans agreed to the general lines of the British proposals, 'he conceded, as a purely personal view, that HMG might consider putting some contribution of manpower into the mixed manned force.'<sup>59</sup>

The Foreign Secretary returned to London buoyed by his reception in Washington. Rusk had appeared to welcome the UK's new ANF proposals, Gordon Walker told the Prime Minister, and Ball's opposition was counter-balanced by that of McNamara, who had been 'neutrally interested.' All the Americans had, however, emphasised that if the British scheme was to work it would have to be sold to the Germans, and that it should not take on the appearance of a prepared Anglo-American plan which was being foisted on Bonn.<sup>60</sup>

In notes made over two months after the event, Gordon Walker claimed – with dubious accuracy – that he had been instrumental in devising the proposals for an Atlantic Nuclear Force, as there had been no ministerial discussion of the scheme before his first visit to Washington. Recollecting the mood on his trip, Gordon Walker thought the Americans had been 'relieved that we were putting forward constructive ideas, and were not trying to stall. They were impressed by some features of the [ANF] plan.' US officials were, nevertheless, insistent that there must be a mixed manned component to any nuclear sharing scheme, and as the Foreign Secretary later admitted, he may have gone too far in a discussing in a hypothetical fashion how a mixed manned surface fleet could eventually be formed.<sup>61</sup>

This was certainly the Prime Minister's impression. In November 1964, Wilson told Hetherington that he thought that a British ANF initiative

was now proving timely. The Americans wanted it and the Germans wanted it. So did others. We hadn't, of course, put in any precise proposals to anyone yet ... [and] He was anxious not to do that until he himself got to Washington. Gordon Walker when in Washington had said rather too much – more than Wilson intended him to, though in the end it hadn't done any harm. Wilson himself had been doing some talking on the direct line to the White House lately. He felt sure that things were going our way.<sup>62</sup>

The Prime Minister was also glossing over the basic American position that without an active contribution of British manpower to the mixed-manned element of an MLF, the State Department felt the Germans would always

feel they had a second-class status in the Alliance. Even the supposedly more neutral McNamara was quite adamant at this stage; at the start of December he had informed Hetherington, who was visiting Washington: 'there must be a mixed manned force. The Germans and others had to share in the tools and the assets through it. They ought to have a stake in the nuclear force. They couldn't share in decisions over nuclear matters unless they were physically involved and contributing to the nuclear force.'<sup>63</sup> Gordon Walker's visit to Washington had certainly served to launch the ANF scheme, but in the face of US scepticism and German indifference (when the more attractive MLF proposition remained on the table), it would face anything but plain sailing.

### **MISC 16 and the Chequers defence summit of November 1964**

The pressure on the pound exerted by the financial markets in early November made it even more imperative that the new Government address the rising pattern of defence spending. Wilson's approach was to convene a weekend meeting, towards the end of the month, of key ministers, officials and defence chiefs at Chequers, the Prime Minister's country residence, in order to discuss the different components of defence policy. Prior to the Chequers meeting, the COS had agreed with Hardman's conclusion that a review of defence expenditure was now 'inescapable', but that major reductions could only be achieved if some of the basic tenets of policy, particularly regarding overseas commitments, were themselves changed beforehand.<sup>64</sup> This was the perennial problem whenever the subject was tackled, but the heavy capital expenditure entailed by the construction of a Polaris force was one other area where ministers and officials could look for short-term savings. However, the ANF scheme complicated how the future of Polaris was regarded: it made no sense to put forward the ANF as the answer to the nuclear sharing problem within NATO, if Britain had nothing to offer as a contribution, while Britain could only play a meaningful role in its command and control structures if a UK Polaris force was included. Though ministers were not wedded to the idea of Polaris constituting 'a creditable independent deterrent', they also wanted to influence the outcome of the crucial NATO debate over nuclear sharing for which a serious Polaris force might be essential.

It was with some of these considerations in mind that on 11 November the Prime Minister convened a small Cabinet Committee, MISC 16, including just two of his close ministerial colleagues, Gordon Walker and Healey, for a discussion on the ANF proposals. They considered a paper from officials, MISC 11/2 (Final), which offered much more detail on the scheme, prepared after two meetings of the Oversea Policy and Defence (Official) Committee (held on 30 October and 2 November), for which – on the Prime Minister's instructions – no minutes were issued.<sup>65</sup> The new

arrangements would combine as one force under unified control the current British V-bombers (apart from some reserved for roles in the Middle and Far East), and Britain's Polaris submarines when they entered service; at least an equal number of US Polaris submarines (and possibly some Minuteman Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) based in the US); an 'MLF' component, which might be mixed-manned; and whatever forces France might later decide to commit. Vetoes would be held by the US and UK over the use of any element of the ANF, and over any changes to its control mechanisms; similar vetoes would be available to any state contributing to the mixed-manned element to the force. The UK and US elements would be committed to the ANF as long as NATO continued to exist. Coordinated targeting between an ANF and the strategic nuclear forces deployed by the US would have to be agreed, something which it was believed would cause great problems for the Americans. UK involvement with the mixed-manning of nuclear systems should be avoided as far as possible (and was certainly ruled out as far as Polaris was concerned), but the extent to which British preferences would be acceptable, would depend, it was argued on how far Britain was willing to give up national control of at least a part of its nuclear forces.

'We believe that ultimately our proposals will not be acceptable,' MISC 11/2 (Final) warned ministers, 'unless we are prepared to abandon national control of at least part of our strategic nuclear forces, in particular the Polaris submarines ... and we suggest that it would be unwise to embark on the negotiations until a clear decision one way or the other has been taken on this point.'

Officials also felt that acceptance of the ANF scheme might present an opportunity for Britain to negotiate reductions in its wider burdens of defence spending, and saw potential with the new command and targeting arrangements for an ANF for some influence to be exerted over the general field of US strategic nuclear planning.<sup>66</sup>

In the Cabinet Secretary's opinion, the MISC 16 meeting would address the central issues of whether the ANF made strategic, political and economic sense for the UK. In strategic terms, Trend wondered if the ANF proposals meant that the independent deterrent would have to be given up 'irrevocably or whether we will allow ourselves some loophole or escape'. In line with the officials' paper, he also hoped that the scheme should be used as a way to reduce or eliminate entirely any contribution to the mixed-manned element of a force, but also as a means to gain from Britain's allies some easing of her overall defence burdens, particularly outside Europe.<sup>67</sup> As far as Healey's Private Secretary was concerned, a Polaris contribution to an ANF would be a big commitment to make and explain, and could probably only be justified if it would not only guarantee a major say in the control of the force, but help to '(a) maximize our bargaining power on NATO strategy and arms

control in Europe; (b) as an insurance against the breakdown of NATO; (c) as a means of keeping very close contact with the United States in a major field of their nuclear strategy and organisation.’<sup>68</sup>

The three ministers who gathered for the MISC 16 meeting agreed that the ANF scheme would have to be presented to other NATO members over the coming weeks. A British allocation from her existing or planned strategic nuclear forces would be offered, including three Polaris submarines. It was acknowledged that three submarines would not allow one always to be on station, but the assignment by the United States of an equivalent or greater number to an ANF would permit a continuous patrol to be maintained by a combined force. Mention was made of the point that should the NATO Alliance dissolve it would be possible to re-establish ‘independent control of our nuclear forces’ even if permissive action links or electronic locks had been used to maintain a hold over the release of nuclear weapons in the command and control arrangements that were eventually introduced for an ANF. Also noted was the point that acquisition of Polaris submarines by the UK was ‘our only means of access to United States technology in the field of nuclear missiles.’<sup>69</sup>

Although the MISC 16 meeting had agreed that the issues raised there would be discussed further by a wider group of ministers and officials at Chequers, the most basic assumption to emerge from the group was that Polaris programme would continue, though on what scale still remained uncertain. If Britain was to play a role in the future nuclear arrangements of the Alliance it would need the hardware to contribute to an ANF, or whatever final scheme of nuclear sharing eventually emerged from inter-Alliance negotiations over the coming few years. In this sense, Polaris represented a key card which gave ministers an important voice when it came to any Washington-Bonn axis that might form over how to handle this sensitive issue. At the same time, there was a residual (and largely unspoken) feeling among some senior ministers that it was important that Polaris should still be capable of reverting to independent and national control if NATO (and hence the ANF) should eventually dissolve. Healey, for example, had made known to his senior officials within a few days of taking office that he supported ‘retention of our capability to recover the force to national control, as an insurance against the break-up of the NATO Alliance.’<sup>70</sup> In the days before MISC 16 met, moreover, Zuckerman had been able to discern that the fitting of permissive action links to nuclear systems – as the Americans were now keen to do – was not an innovation that meant they could never revert to national control if the situation demanded.

During his first weeks in office, Healey had been keen to explore the option of a three boat Polaris force. He saw this as potentially linked in the ANF with a similar size of US force, and so representing a reasonable size of contribution. This also provided a credible argument over the need to preserve at least some of the Polaris programme, especially if some of his ministerial colleagues pressed for complete abolition of the force when cuts to

defence spending were up for discussion.<sup>71</sup> A key concern for the Defence Secretary in this regard was whether a three boat force would be large enough to allow one submarine to be kept on continuous station (and so represent a credible deterrent for national purposes), a query where he looked to the Navy Department for advice.

The Navy Department's line was that only a five boat force would be a respectable contribution to the ANF, but were also concerned that should the NATO Alliance dissolve, taking the ANF with it, the Polaris force could still be recovered to constitute an effective independent national deterrent. A three boat force, in this scenario, would not be enough to form a credible deterrent.<sup>72</sup> The COS met on 17 November, and discussed how best to respond to the signs that support for a three boat force might gain adherents in the new Government. They were wary about simply standing firm on the position that a five boat force represented a minimum credible deterrent, and that three boats would not be a worthwhile force in either ANF or purely national terms. For one, this contradicted the stance they had adopted in December 1963, when they had argued that four boats would be sufficient. They also recognised that if it was their formal position that a three boat force would be inadequate both for the ANF and for national purposes, they could be offering a hostage to fortune by prompting ministers to consider more seriously the option of having no boats at all. F. W. Mottershead, the Deputy Under Secretary (Policy) in the Defence Secretariat, informed the COS that

the Secretary of State had been trying to find reasons to retain the Polaris force. To obtain political support for this, he would need to show some difference between the proposals now put forward and those approved under the previous administration. The withdrawal of the 'supreme interest' clause was unlikely in itself to be sufficient in this respect, unless accompanied by a reduction of the force to three or four boats. Present indications were that Ministers were working on a reduction to three, but if the Chiefs of Staff were to state that rather than have three they would prefer to have none, he believed that the Secretary of State might give up the effort to retain the force at all.

Mottershead therefore advised that it might 'be best if the Chiefs of Staff were to hinge their reply on the retention of a four boat force, observing that in 1963 they had recommended this number to the last administration.' In the worst case a force of three would, in any case, Mottershead maintained, still allow one boat to be kept on continuous station for a considerable period of time. The eventual conclusion of the COS meeting on 17 November was that the CNS would be left to inform Healey that the Chiefs felt that a three boat force, if linked to an American equivalent, could be a viable contribution to the ANF, but could not be regarded as an adequate national deterrent if a break-up of NATO should occur.<sup>73</sup>

Admiral Luce therefore proceeded to tell Healey that while it could almost be achieved, a three boat squadron would not allow one submarine to be kept on constant patrol, and would place a huge strain on the support, refitting, and maintenance services which would have to be provided. Operating cycles would be exceptionally tight with only three boats, and the CNS was at pains to stress the hazards which might lie ahead if this course were adopted: 'we shall be in strait jacket without any days, let alone weeks, to spare. Things just don't work out this way. It will not just be accidents which will break the cycle – it will be wearing out or dislocation to the machinery from time to time, however good the workmanship and maintenance.' In theory, however, four boats meant 1.7 boats on station at all times, and with five this figure rose to 2.1, but 'practically,' he advised, 'we need four to keep one boat on patrol with any measure of certainty, and with five we should have a good chance of two.'<sup>74</sup>

With ministers to convene at Chequers for their important summit on defence policy, the link between the ANF proposals and the future of the Polaris programme became all the more pronounced amongst some of the main players. Healey was advised by his Private Secretary, Arthur Hockaday, that at Chequers he would probably wish to urge his colleagues to make an early announcement about continuation of the Polaris programme as this would give Wilson and Healey more bargaining power when they paid their first visit to Washington in December in order formerly to present the ANF proposals to the Johnson administration.<sup>75</sup> Zuckerman's position at this stage was, as he advised Healey, that he should argue for a five boat force on purely political grounds, as anything less would be inferior in number to the planned French nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) force, while the largest possible contribution to the ANF would increase Britain's bargaining position over the detailed negotiations that would have to take place over such contentious issues as the control mechanisms under which it should operate. Referring to the Polaris force as 'a lever through which we could exercise our influence', Zuckerman had minuted the Secretary of State on 18 November with the thought that,

Obviously political judgment rather than mathematical calculation is going to decide just how big a lever we need to have in our hands. My own belief is that to be meaningful as a political weapon our Polaris fleet should certainly not be effectively smaller than the proposed French strategic long-range systems, and should also be large enough to impress the Americans that what we would be ready to 'hand over' to NATO was a force which assured a reasonable second strike capability if operated on its own. In my view, this means five and at the least four boats; three boats would not provide an assured second strike capability.

However, Zuckerman's position, he wanted to impress upon Healey, was not based upon any idea that if NATO were to dissolve the UK should have available for national use a coherent second strike force with could be

projected as an independent nuclear deterrent. Instead, it was based on a notion of what would constitute 'a nuclear lever of sufficient size which we could wield effectively for the political purposes of helping arrest the disruption of NATO [through plans for an MLF] on the one hand, and contributing to further progress in lessening East-West tensions on the other.'<sup>76</sup>

Just before the Chequers meeting, Healey presented his senior ministerial colleagues with an MoD paper that laid out the different considerations bearing on the size of the UK Polaris force in relation to the ANF proposals, with a focus on what would make an adequate contribution, but also what number of boats were required 'for [a] minimal nuclear deterrent which would revert to national control in the event of the break-up of the NATO Alliance.' Under the plans approved by the previous Government, five boats were anticipated; construction had begun on four of these, but keels laid for only two. No firm order had been placed with either of the two main submarine yards for a fifth boat, but a decision on this issue was needed by early 1965. Included in Healey's paper was the Navy Department's advice that a five boat force (costing £406 million) would allow two boats with 32 missiles to be kept on station, giving a margin against accidents, refit problems or loss at sea, and posing a deterrent threat against 20 Russian cities. This was a level, the paper repeated, which the JIC had found represented an unacceptable level of damage to the Soviet leadership, and so a credible deterrent. Four boats permitted only one to be kept on station at all times, but for about 35 weeks a year two would be on patrol. Some margin would exist for unforeseen circumstances 'but not much', and delays in the refit programme would inevitably increase the periods when only one boat was available on patrol. Capital costs for four boats were estimated at £366 million, and running costs about £21 million a year from 1970/71 onwards. As long as there were no accidents or refit problems, a three boat force – at a cost of £321 million – would also make it possible to have one boat on station 'for nearly all the time'. There would, however, be no margin for the unforeseen, and across the anticipated twenty year life of the force, some problems were almost certain to occur.

Military arguments pointed toward a five boat force, and would allow a larger contribution to be made to the ANF. If matched by a similar US contribution it could weaken the military case for the much disliked mixed-manned shipborne MLF proposals. And it would provide 'an effective national deterrent' if NATO were to break-up. Although no damage level was cited in the paper, a four boat force was also described as 'militarily acceptable', though being slightly less impressive in ANF terms. A three boat force contribution to the ANF was regarded as acceptable as well, while it was 'also possible to argue that a United Kingdom force of this size, could be regarded as a minimum deterrent for national purposes – but only just.'<sup>77</sup>

The Chequers meeting, which were held over the weekend of 21/22 November, was dominated by recognition of the need to control defence spending. The Treasury and the newly-created Department of Economic

Affairs ('with all the solemnity at our command' as it was put), sought to use the occasion to warn ministers that 'we cannot see a satisfactory solution for the economic problems of this country in the next decade unless an immediate halt is called to the increases in the Defence Budget, and a steady reduction takes place in the proportion of the nation's resources devoted to defence.' It was proposed that the Government's goal should be to limit annual defence spending to the current figure of £2,000 million (at 1964 prices) by 1969/70 (when under existing estimates this figure was set to rise to about £2,400 million).<sup>78</sup> The ensuing discussions at Chequers offered a comprehensive outline of the problems faced with maintaining Britain's many defence roles in the face of reduced financial provision. However, no firm conclusions over precisely where cuts should come were reached by ministers, although the need to make painful choices – after consultations with Britain's allies – was recognised. There was said to be 'considerable support' for the idea that Britain's world-wide overseas commitments should be maintained, while

Developments in the field of nuclear weapons might well mean that over the next ten years it would be impossible for us to contemplate the additional expenditure that would be required for the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent in the post-Polaris generation on anything approaching the present scale. Our forces in Europe were no longer required at the present level for military reasons, since it was the general view that there was now no longer a risk of war with the Soviet Union as long as NATO solidarity lasted.

This argument pointed toward a reduction of forces on NATO's central European front, perhaps to a level that would 'demonstrate that a deliberate and planned attack would inevitably escalate into a nuclear conflict.' At the same time, Britain's major defence role could then be focused on upholding stability and Western interests in the area east of Suez, where it was still anchored through its existing commitments and bases. However, other voices reversed the picture, and argued that Britain's priorities should lie with European defence, as large reductions in forces would be very difficult to achieve, and vital influence over US and German policy in NATO could be prejudiced if the UK's strength diminished. Political changes in the environment east of Suez also made it hazardous to assume that British bases could be maintained indefinitely, and an overt British presence could even serve to undermine interests, therefore making it more 'in accord with our long-term interest to abandon our oversea role or substantially reduce it.'<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, the balance of opinion remained with those who favoured standing by the east of Suez role, and in a continuation of the pattern that had been followed under the Conservatives, Foreign Office officials resisted any scaling back of overseas commitments. Given this situation, the MoD looked for savings in its research and development budget, and in particular to cuts in

some of the more expensive advanced aircraft projects which were in the pipeline. No final decisions were taken, and there would need to be a study made of the savings produced by buying American alternatives 'off the shelf', but it was clear that TSR-2, amongst other projects, was likely to face cancellation. By the end of the meeting, it had been decided to pursue a comprehensive defence review, to be held under Trend's overall direction as chair of the Overseas Policy and Defence (Official) Committee, with the aim of identifying how defence spending could be brought down to the £2,000 million level advocated by the economic departments.<sup>80</sup>

It was against this background that nuclear policy and the future of Polaris were discussed at Chequers. The assembled senior ministers and officials had been furnished in advance with a copy of the MISC 11/2(Final) paper on the ANF scheme discussed ten days previously by Wilson, Gordon Walker and Healey in the more intimate setting of the MISC 16 Committee.<sup>81</sup> The Government's policy of promoting the ANF received much discussion, particularly as Wilson, Gordon Walker and Healey would soon be travelling to Washington, partly in order to sell the initiative to the Johnson administration.<sup>82</sup> Gordon Walker began the discussion over the ANF at the end of the first day at Chequers, explaining that the reception to British ideas from his recent visits to Washington and Bonn had been more favourable than expected, while the Italians and Belgians had also been interested. However, it was important not to underestimate US and German commitment to a mixed-manned force. Three long-term British objectives stood out in Gordon Walker's opinion: firstly, preventing a Franco-German nuclear alliance, which might lead to a European nuclear force; secondly, and although it could not be considered a 'serious danger', stopping the formation of any special nuclear alliance between the United States and West Germany; and thirdly, giving an opportunity for France to join any new nuclear arrangements. The Foreign Secretary felt that it would be important to stress to the Americans the size of the proposed UK contribution to the force, and that Britain's 'bargaining position would be strong since we could decline to contribute to an ANF and stand on the present position.' Even more optimistically, a revision of NATO strategy might also be sought which would allow reductions in the level of British forces committed in Europe.

Senior ministers were in general agreement with the Foreign Secretary's line. There was opposition to UK participation in any elements of a nuclear force that involved mixed-manning, and an insistence that if such a force were created an American veto on its use should be maintained. It was affirmed that the ANF proposals should be put forward 'in as positive a form as possible' stressing they were 'designed to strengthen NATO, to move towards a reduction in East-West tension and to contribute to non-dissemination of nuclear weapons.' The Prime Minister's conviction was that the government had to 'make sure [the] US [was] still committed to [the] defence of Europe. But if she retires to Fortress America, [and] NATO breaks

up, our P[olaris] subs would return to UK ports and our independent deterrent would be reestablished.<sup>783</sup>

On the second day of the talks, the precise nature of Britain's commitment to the ANF was discussed. Wilson began with the statement that 'we should approach the negotiations on the basis that we would maintain our present nuclear capability in the various theatres unless and until this could be replaced by something more satisfactory in the form of joint control. We should not contemplate withdrawal and leaving a nuclear vacuum.' On the issue of the size of the Polaris force to be committed to the ANF, Healey maintained that work on four of the boats was too advanced for any of them to be cancelled, while a three boat force would not represent a credible independent deterrent, and five would offer a stronger ANF bargaining position, 'both with those allies who want to get it in and those who don't want us to have it independently.' The CDS, Mountbatten, added that four was the 'absolute minimum' if one was to be kept on station continuously: five would be 'much better', but four was 'just acceptable.'

Opposition, however, came from George Brown, the First Secretary of State, and head of the Department of Economic Affairs. Brown thought four boats were 'politically inconsistent' with the Government's purpose to disavow any intention of having a credible national force, while three would work in the context of the ANF if matched by a US contribution. Gordon Walker also considered that three boats would be appropriate for the ANF, and that it was 'inconceivable, in practice that, if [the] Alliance broke up (improbable), we would wage nuclear war alone.' He still thought that four should be 'floating about' in the background of the negotiations with the Americans as a bargaining factor, but would choose to settle for three if possible. There was – as the formal minutes of the meeting later summed up these arguments – 'considerable support' voiced for a three boat contribution which was

best calculated to achieve our political objectives and would effect the maximum saving for the United Kingdom economy. There were, moreover, strong political reasons in favour of a United Kingdom force of this size, in that since it would not represent a creditable independent deterrent, it would make it apparent that we had abandoned any idea of regaining independent national control at any time in the future and had committed ourselves irrevocably to an international force. While this admittedly did not provide full national insurance should NATO break up, not only did the latter seem most improbable but even if it were to happen we could not hope to maintain our national security alone, but should be bound to seek the negotiation of alternative alliances.

These arguments were, however, immediately met with a firm rebuttal from both the CDS and the CNS, Admiral Luce, who highlighted the problems of morale in the Polaris force – which would have to operate 'under wartime

conditions' – if only three boats were approved. With only three boats the crews 'would know that, unlike [the] US, there is nothing else behind them.' The Polaris force, it was asserted, could only work at the highest peak of efficiency with very high morale 'and in the knowledge that national importance was attached to the maintenance of one submarine always on station.' With only three submarines this could not be achieved, 'and the sense of national purpose would therefore suffer.'

At this point in the discussion, Wilson himself interjected to say that he thought the 'risk of [a] normal accident [was] a serious factor.' Reckoning that the Americans would prefer the British to have three boats rather than four, he wondered if it would be possible to negotiate for three under the ANF proposals, on the understanding that the Americans would offer a replacement if there was an accident. However, Zuckerman thought this would not be a workable proposition (as provision of the US boat would involve the supply of a modern reactor, and when up to then the American had been unwilling to share their latest submarine reactor technology). Wilson then pressed for a solution which involved building four boats, but keeping one in 'mothballs', an idea which the CDS thought might be feasible. Seizing on this opening, Wilson suggested, 'Then start with 3: keep open [option of] fourth – to see how US react in terms of Alliance; if necessary, build fourth and mothball.' But Brown still objected, as this left 'credible independent deterrent open for [the] future – which is what, politically, we ought to prevent any future Govt from having.' 'But our contribution to NATO must also be credible,' Wilson replied. 'Anyhow, [we] needn't decide now: if US back 3, we must still decide whether to mothball a fourth for reasons of accident and morale.' When Gordon Walker questioned whether a total ANF fleet of five boats (implying three British, and two American) would be enough to maintain morale in the UK element, Mountbatten again demurred. Wilson then moved to settle the matter, by summing up that the possibility of a mothballed fourth boat would be held in reserve, and not decided until there had been further ministerial discussion; in the meantime the fifth boat would be cancelled.<sup>84</sup>

The Chequers meeting had therefore revealed amongst several ministers, including the Prime Minister, a strong readiness to consider a force of only three boats if it were to be committed to an ANF. The assumption emerging from the meeting was that a fourth boat would still be built, but its prime purpose was to act as a reserve against accident or mishap, rather than a necessary part of an independent nuclear force (as Healey and the COS had been insistent upon). Of course, if negotiations for the ANF were to breakdown then a four boat force would be available as a credible independent deterrent. But at Chequers this contingency was conceived of as a useful bargaining incentive to convince the United States that it would be better to support the UK's ANF proposals rather than seen as an option to assure an 'independent' Polaris force would eventually emerge in the late 1960s.

In his memoir of the Labour Government of 1964–70, Wilson recalled that along with Healey and Gordon Walker he had reviewed the future of

Polaris and had concluded that 'the production of the submarines was well past the point of no return', and that cancellation would have been at unacceptably high cost. Instead, they resolved to go ahead with four rather than five boats and 'ensure their deployment as a fully committed part of the NATO defence forces.' And as Wilson put it, 'there was to be no nuclear pretence or suggestion of a go-it-alone British nuclear war against the Soviet Union.' Moreover, it was Labour policy as Wilson saw it, to 'remove the clause' in the Nassau Agreement which 'was based on a fictitious assertion of independent nuclear action by Britain.' The clause itself had 'never been taken seriously in the United States or in Britain' and had been 'a sop to the right wing of the Conservative party, traditionally opposed to what they conceived to be the subordination of Britain's defences to the United States.'<sup>85</sup>

However, Healey and Zuckerman later offered contradictory accounts in their own memoirs of this period. Indeed, in Healey's version of events, conversion of the entire Polaris force (hulls for two of which had already been laid down) to hunter/killer submarines was still a viable option in late 1964, but he was told by Wilson and Gordon Walker not to disclose this basic fact to his other Cabinet colleagues.<sup>86</sup> From Wilson's point of view it is clear that he understood also the domestic political repercussions of any decision to renounce Britain's future strategic nuclear capability without any major concession in return. It must always be remembered that the Government had secured only a very narrow majority in 1964, while Wilson seems to have felt that the Conservative attacks on Labour's nuclear policy in the election campaign had cost the party important votes. At the end of November he had reminded George Ball, while the latter was visiting London in order to press the case for the mixed-manned elements of the MLF and renunciation of a national nuclear capability, that 'the last General Election had been fought on the question of the independence of the British nuclear deterrent and our consequential political independence of the United States. Merely to hand over Polaris would be a vote-loser in this country.'<sup>87</sup>

The full Cabinet was informed of the conclusions of the Chequers defence summit on 26 November. Trend's brief for the meeting included mention of the fact that closely connected to the ANF proposals was the matter of the size of the Polaris force, which would be 'probably 4 submarines' (though in his own hand, Wilson circled the number 4 and placed a question mark beside it). Such questions need not, Trend continued, 'affect the principle of our proposal to abandon our independent nuclear deterrent.' With Britain prepared to commit its strategic nuclear forces 'irrevocably so long as NATO existed' to an ANF, an equivalent US contribution would be sought. At the same time, opposition to the present US scheme for a mixed manned surface fleet would be maintained, but it was recognised that it might be necessary to concede a mixed component to the ANF (made up either of Air Force squadrons, or even US land-based missiles). Vetoes for both the US and UK over use or methods of control of the ANF would be made conditions of its creation, but there must be 'formal equality' between the member countries