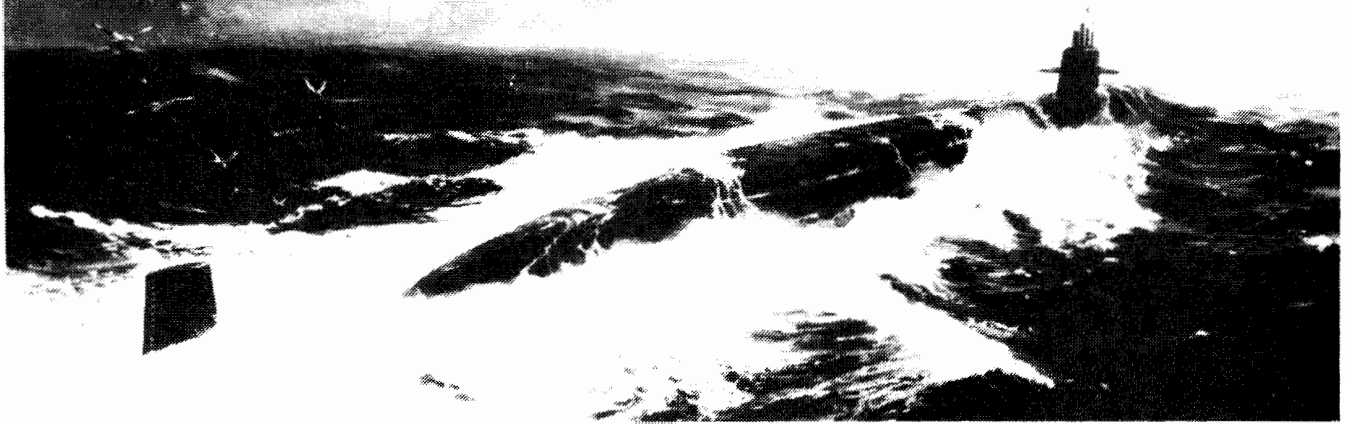


Britain's rush for Trident missiles

by Susan Welsh



When British Defence Secretary Francis Pym suddenly announced in the House of Commons July 15 that his government had decided to spend £5 billion (\$11.75 billion) over the next 15 years to build up a new strategic nuclear deterrent based on the U.S. "Trident" missile, parliamentarians, journalists and defense experts jumped to their feet with indignation.

Where was the "informed public debate" the government had promised on Britain's most important military decision in 18 years, the decision of how—or whether—to replace the aging "Polaris" submarine-launched nuclear missiles?

Pym had told the French daily *Le Matin* April 1 that a decision would be made "in about six months' time. In any case, by the end of the year." Then suddenly, on the third day of French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's first state visit to West Germany, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sent a message to President Jimmy Carter requesting favorable terms for the purchase of the Trident I missiles, for which Britain would build nuclear warheads and four submarines.

Carter agreed, to the surprise of British analysts who never believed their country would get as good a deal as it did in 1962 when President Kennedy sold Britain the "Polaris" missiles. The exact nature of U.S. pricing concessions on the Trident have not been revealed.

The decision was made without even a formal Cabinet meeting, as ministers were polled in what the London *Guardian* called "a Whitehall version of a postal ballot." Pym then announced the results in Parliament several days ahead of schedule, since the government had reason to believe that the terms of the deal were about to be leaked to the press in Washington. The Carter admini-

stration has given no account of its motives in thus seemingly betraying the confidence of a principal ally on a topic of considerable sensitivity.

The great secrecy with which London has handled this affair precludes a precise evaluation of the reasons for such haste. But the basic motivation of the Thatcher government—and of competing factions which reject the Trident decision—can be outlined.

Britain is hoping to keep its options open for exerting political leverage simultaneously with the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union and China—but in a world which in many ways is slipping out of British control. Even during the postwar period since Britain lost its empire, British "elite" families and banking houses have exercised a power in world affairs far out of proportion to their country's increasingly threadbare condition.

Anglo-American decline

This control is now threatened by several interrelated factors. First, the consolidation of the Franco-German policy alliance that is based on the European Monetary System and is now increasingly acquiring military features.

Second, the precipitous decline of the British economy under the "fiscal conservative" policies of the Thatcher administration.

Third, the political, economic and military deterioration of the United States, the "dumb giant" through which Britannia has continued to "rule the waves" following the demise of its own imperial power.

The fact that America's decline coincides with the increasing power and self-assurance of the Soviet Union, which is pursuing a vigorous policy of indus-

trialization, scientific, technological and military development places certain British schemes in particular jeopardy at a time when the United Kingdom is weaker than ever before.

The Trident decision, therefore, was made primarily on political, not military grounds. By purchasing an American weapon system rather than opting to build one of its own, Britain seeks to continue its postwar "special relationship" with the United States. As the *Baltimore Sun* editorialized July 17, the decision "reinvigorates the Anglo-American military cooperation that grew out of World War II."

But Thatcher and Pym hastened to add that they will consult on the new "deterrent" with all the NATO allies, and Thatcher declared in Parliament that she supports the efforts of West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to secure arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. The *Financial Times* July 16 editorially called the Trident "a reserve for Europe" that should eventually lead to a joint nuclear force.

Finally, the government has rejected the cruise missile, the principal alternative proposal to the Trident, as the basis of its strategic "deterrent." Since many cruise missile advocates argue that Britain should adopt a strategy of "limited nuclear war," the government may use its rejection of the cruise as a bargaining chip to draw Moscow into arms control negotiations, given the fact that the Soviets view "limited nuclear war" as an insane doctrine.

Whether Thatcher herself will take this approach is not yet clear, but her Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, has made recent overtures in this direction. Of special concern to Britain is Soviet progress in military research and development, since a Soviet breakthrough in antiballistic missile defense would render the Trident worthless. It is precisely this area of research that Moscow is pushing most intensively.

The Trident missile has a range much greater than that of the Polaris—4,500 miles compared to 2,800. This means that British missiles would be able to reach Moscow from such locations as the Indian Ocean and the Far East—a consolidation that Britain's geopoliticians and "China-watchers" have left out of account. The U.S. naval base on British-owned Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean will be made available to the Trident submarines, according to the terms of the Carter-Thatcher deal.

But the most pressing concern of many British defense analysts is Europe. Columnist Peter Jenkins wrote in *The Guardian* July 16 that the only reason to keep a nuclear deterrent in the first place is that "it cannot be in our or anyone's interest for France to become the sole nuclear power in Europe while Germany is the overwhelming land power."

The Trident decision should have been delayed,

Jenkins argued, until Britain devises a foreign and military policy that will return its lost influence. "Mrs. Thatcher is absent from the top table at which Schmidt and Carter sup. They are more and more the architects of Europe's future," he said.

Many opponents of the Trident decision argue that it will inevitably lead to cutbacks in expenditures for conventional defense, including reductions in British forces in West Germany, the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR). The four British divisions in West Germany were originally deployed there on a permanent basis in 1954 to keep "German nationalism" in check, and some analysts fear that any cut in those forces will strengthen the Franco-German alliance. Col. Jonathan Alford, deputy director of the London International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), testified before a parliamentary committee July 9 that the expensive Trident program would make conventional force cuts inevitable. The IISS advocates either prolonging the life of the Polaris system or buying relatively inexpensive cruise missiles that would be launched from trucks or from a fleet of fast patrol boats or hovercraft. (If cruise missiles were deployed on new submarines, the total cost would be about the same as the Trident program.)

'Military moonshine'

Another advocate of the cruise missile, Field Marshal Lord Carver, former Chief of the Defence Staff, argued in a speech last month that it is "military moonshine" to think the Trident program could be implemented without cutting forces in Central Europe. Carver opposes the continuation of a "strategic deterrent"—forces capable of penetrating the defenses of the city of Moscow—and opts instead for deployment of the cruise missile as a theater nuclear weapon.

The Thatcher government tried to placate such critics by announcing that £1.3 billion in new equipment is being ordered for the Army, including new tanks and armored personnel carriers for the Rhine Army. A new armored regiment will be added to the BAOR, by reintroducing 60 tanks that were withdrawn from service two years ago because of power shortages. The fanfare with which this new allocation was announced—the day before the Trident decision—obscured the fact that plans to equip the Rhine Army with a new model of main battle tank, the MBT-80, had been scrapped in favor of the current Challenger model.

Such financial constraints cut even deeper than the Trident's critics admit, in view of the decimation of Britain's industrial plant and equipment and the falling skill levels of its workforce. As it is, there is some doubt as to whether British shipyards will be capable of producing the Trident submarine at all—and an "all-British" system like a submarine-launched cruise missile may well have proved completely unfeasible.