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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

REMOVAL OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS FROM THE TASK GROUP

Note by the Ministry of Defence

1. OD(SA)(82) 3rd meeting invited the Ministry of Defence to review the options available for the removal of nuclear weapons from the Task Group without detriment to its main objectives, and to set out the short and long term factors involved.
2. Nuclear weapons for use in the anti-submarine role are on board HM Ships INVINCIBLE, HERMES, BROADSWORD and BRILLIANT. These weapons also have the capability of being delivered by Sea Harrier against land targets, but such carriage has not yet been cleared or practised. The options available for removing the weapons and the safety implications are set out in detail at Annex. Briefly, the only option which appears practicable is to offload the weapons onto Ascension Island and then return them by air to the UK. The estimate is that this operation would delay the Task Group's planned timetable for deployment by at least 36 hours. This would be a major disadvantage to the Task Group for the early conduct of operations in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands.

There would also be increased safety risks involved. A more limited option does exist to transfer the weapons within the Task Group in order to place them in the least vulnerable stowages.

3. The arguments in favour of removal of the weapons rest both upon potential public and international reaction should their presence become known and upon judgements as to their likely fate in the course of any hostilities.
4. Were any of the Ships of the Task Group carrying nuclear weapons to enter territorial waters 3 miles round the Falkland Islands, South Georgia or the South Sandwich Islands we should immediately be in breach of our obligations under the Treaty of Tlatelolco. But it is possible, without detriment to the operation, to ensure that ships carrying weapons do not enter these waters. Ministers could thus publicly affirm that the Treaty had not been breached.
5. Leaving aside the question of Treaty obligations, it is clearly suspected that HM Ships deployed in the Task Group are carrying nuclear weapons. ~~There could be widespread misunderstanding, both here and abroad, about the reasons for this. We should almost certainly be accused of being prepared to use them against Argentina. Our policy on this general question has always been (as is that of the United States) to refuse either to confirm or deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons in any particular place at any particular time. We should have to stick with this policy.~~ ^{We could} Nevertheless, ~~State categorically that we had no intention of using nuclear weapons~~ ^{in this context} the fact that we should not be able to comment on the nature of the weapons without setting a damaging precedent would leave the

field open for speculation that they may be intended for use by Sea Harrier aircraft against targets on the Argentine mainland.

6. If one of HM Ships carrying nuclear weapons were to be damaged or sunk during the course of hostilities and the weapons it was carrying were damaged there would be a possibility that fissile material would be released into the environment. We should have to declare the area of the incident as an actual or potential radiological hazard, and make every effort to recover the weapons. There ^would be international criticism, and any actual release of significant quantities of fissile material from the weapons would compound the problem.

7. The most vulnerable magazines are those in the Type 22 Frigates. A direct hit with Exocet on the magazine would probably cause fragment penetration of the warhead and lead to radioactive release. The risk of a similar situation in HERMES, with its dedicated armour protected magazine deep in the ship, is assessed as minimal from Exocet and only moderate from a torpedo or mine. The magazine in INVINCIBLE is also deep but is not so well protected and contains a mixture of torpedoes and nuclear weapons. The risk in INVINCIBLE is thus slightly greater than in HERMES because of the effect that detonation of torpedo warheads would have on their colocated nuclear ones. ^{Custom} The Royal Fleet Auxiliaries (RFAs) have dedicated magazines deep in the ship and the risks are similar to INVINCIBLE. It would be relatively simple to transfer weapons

from the Frigates to a Carrier or RFA, and this could be done more covertly, with the embarked press correspondents diverted. *and without delaying the operation.*

8. It is also conceivable that weapons might fall into the hands of the Argentines, by salvage of one of HM Ships that had been sunk, stranded or captured. However unlikely, the consequences of this would be ^{not even} highly undesirable and the acquisition of UK nuclear weapon technology in this way by a State which has no such weapons might well prejudice the special Anglo-US relationship in these matters.

9. The implication for our nuclear stockpile of the loss of either HERMES or INVINCIBLE would be serious, since the ships are carrying approximately 40% and 25% respectively of our entire stockpile of nuclear depth bombs.

10. The principal short-term argument against ^{will} removal of the weapons is, as has been mentioned, the delay involved. The Commander-in-Chief Fleet has said that the lift of weapons by helicopter to shore would conflict with his heavy storing programme for the ships, presently planned for only a 24 hour stopover; he estimates a further 36 hours would be required to complete the total operation with subsequent major disadvantage to operations in the Falkland Islands. The early arrival of the Task Group in the area is ^{highly} important to prevent the further buildup of Argentine forces on the Falkland Islands, and in particular improvements to the operational capacity of the airfield there. Disembarkation of the weapons by night might reduce the delay but it is not recommended because of the additional hazards involved.

11. If we were to remove the weapons at Ascension Island, there would be significantly greater risk of their existence on the Task Group's ships becoming known. The lengthy and complicated operation could be observed by journalists with the Task Group, Americans and other personnel on the island, and even by the Russians. This would make it harder for Ministers to maintain the "neither confirm nor deny" line. Although we admit freely that RN helicopters and Sea Harriers have the capability to deploy nuclear weapons (for example, in SDE 81) and it is therefore a relatively simple deduction to establish which classes of ships are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, we have never admitted that such weapons are carried in the ships in peacetime. International knowledge of this might well be damaging and would jeopardise future visits by RN ships of the same (or other) classes to foreign ports. Were potential host Governments to operate on the presumption that our ships and aircraft were carrying nuclear weapons, we could find a greater number of foreign countries closed to us. Furthermore, the movement towards the establishment of "nuclear weapon free zones" is likely to increase rather than diminish, which could lead to the presence of RN ships and RAF aircraft giving rise to increasing controversy.

12. It is possible that, at the same time as the current operation, a state of tension with the Soviet Union might develop. The removal of the weapons would make the re-deployment of the ships for NATO tasks dependant on first re-embarking their nuclear weapons. This could cause a delay in their deployment and

necessitate a return to a UK port unless we were prepared to re-embark the weapons at sea. To take the latter course in tension would be highly visible to the Soviets who could be expected to be marking our ships. However since the stock carried in the Group represents a high proportion of our total stockpile it could be argued that some of them should be returned to UK, thus making them available for use by the ships which still remain within the NATO area.

13. The Chiefs of Staff believe that removal of the weapons would unacceptably delay the Task Group's arrival in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands and thus the early initiation of operations there. The operation of full removal would sharply increase the risk of the existence of nuclear weapons with the Task Group becoming publicly known.

14. The Ministry of Defence therefore concludes that:

- a. The risks involved in retaining nuclear weapons with the Fleet should be accepted.
- b. Nuclear weapons should be transferred from the Frigates to the larger ships in the Task Group.
- c. Commander in Chief Fleet should be instructed so to dispose his forces that there is no question of the Treaty of Tlatelolco being breached.
- d. In public statements Ministers should adhere to the "neither confirm nor deny" policy.

Annex:

- A. Options for Removal of the Weapons and the Safety Implications.

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Annex to
OD(SA)(82)

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OPTIONS FOR REMOVAL OF THE WEAPONS AND THE SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

OPTIONS

1. Nuclear weapons could be moved between ships in the task group by passing the containerised weapons by heavy jackstay between ships. But the only methods available to transfer weapons to the Ascension Islands are by helicopter or by Landing Craft (LCT) from FEARLESS. The latter method is not considered feasible, because of the heavy swell that runs throughout the year making loading of the LCTs alongside ships at anchor hazardous, as well as the lack of suitable facilities ashore.
2. There are two modes of helicopter transfer. The first entails carrying the unprotected weapon in the captive mode on the normal weapon pylon. No firing circuits are connected and throughout the transfer the two-key system is enforced. This mode has high visibility due to the lengthy loading and unloading process. Should the helicopter crash on the short overland section ($\frac{1}{2}$ mile) of the route to the airfield or on the airfield itself there is a possibility of semi-permanent area contamination due to fire and subsequent HE explosion.

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The second mode is to carry the containerised weapon as an underslung load. This has not yet been authorised by the MOD because of the risk of malfunction of the cargo hook, of which there have been instances. Additionally the risk of human error cannot be ruled out. Ministers may regard the increased risks as justified if they consider the removal of the weapons to be essential, but they will wish to consider this very carefully.

3. The nuclear weapons in the Type 22 Frigates could be transferred at sea to HERMES, INVINCIBLE or FORT AUSTIN, *or Rumm* where they would be stowed in magazines offering greater protection. FORT AUSTIN may however be too far away and otherwise committed. This operation could be covert and more easily protected from the embarked Press.

4. The nuclear weapons in all warships could be transferred to RFAs RESOURCE and FORT AUSTIN. Additional containers would have to be embarked via the Ascension Islands.

5. Removal of the weapons from the more vulnerable Type 22s to either RFA would considerably reduce the risk of nuclear weapon accident during action. However further removal of carriers' weapons to RFAs would make no contribution to safety unless operational restrictions were to be placed on the movements of the RFAs to keep them clear of any likely attack by the Argentine Navy, who might well regard them as a prime target in any case. These RFAs are highly important for Fleet support, both as supply ships and helicopter platforms, and restricting them would impose operational limitations.

6. No other RFAs capable of removing the weapons from the Task Group are available within the timescale of the present operations.

7. All the nuclear weapons could be offloaded to Ascension by helicopter in special containers, which would have to be flown to Ascension Island and airlifted to the warships. In the absence of suitable facilities to meet both the safety and security needs, the number of weapons involved could not be stored on the island for any length of time. Even if this were not the case, the weapon stowage and the necessary security guard would attract attention. The fact that that these weapons were ashore would soon become known to the Americans on the base and the Islanders, from whom it could leak further. In addition, it would become obvious to the Americans that we were not complying with the security standards agreed with them.

8. Storage of nuclear weapons in the Ascension Islands would also be vulnerable to special operations by the Soviets.

9. The weapons could be packed in their special containers, lifted ashore by helicopter and then airlifted back to UK. Provided the rate of delivery to shore matched the rate of extraction by air to UK the time on the ground would be minimal. The maximum rate of extraction is assessed as 12 per day. Because of the intricate loading procedures involved, this operation would have high visibility and thus it would be difficult to keep the knowledge from United States personnel, particularly from anyone with previous experience of nuclear weapons.

In view of the need to reduce helicopter transit distance, it would be difficult to prevent a shore observer identifying from which ships the containers moved to and fro. CINCFLEET estimates that the operation would involve a delay of at least 36 hours to the Task Group.

SAFETY

10. At a meeting of the various safety authorities on 10 April 1982 to discuss these and other factors it was assessed that, provided the weapon in its container was carried at a height not more than 75ft over the sea and 40ft overland, the weapon would be likely to remain safe if accidentally dropped from the aircraft or if the container made contact with the ground due to turbulent air conditions. Flying time overland would be short as the airfield is only half a mile from the beach. The general view was that in the present circumstances, although the safety of the proposed procedure has not been proven, it would be a reasonable one to adopt if Ministers judge that the removal of weapons from the ship is essential.
11. Maximum attention to safety would be given in drawing up detailed operation orders. Experts from the UK would direct the various stages, and specialist accident response teams will be sent out beforehand. It is most unlikely that in any phase of the removal operation more than one weapon would be involved because of the normal safety rules for storage and handling.

12. In the event of a nuclear weapon accident there is no risk of an atomic bomb type explosion. However there is a possibility that quantities of fissile material may be dispersed into the atmosphere (or the sea) as a result of the detonation of the conventional high explosive in the weapon or a fire. Essential personnel (others will be kept away) in the immediate vicinity of the accident may be killed or injured as a result of blast or debris. Outside this area the dispersal of fissile material would extend downwind to 2½ kilometres in average weather conditions, resulting in individuals receiving doses in excess of those permitted in National Radiological Protection Board guidance unless countermeasures were taken. Although in a heavily populated area this might result in up to about 50 additional delayed deaths from cancer, in a lightly populated area the figure would be very much less.

13. If on the other hand the weapons are not removed from the Task Force at Ascension it is conceivably possible for a hit on the magazine in action to lead to the dispersal of fissile material from some or all of the weapons. The significant effects, again in average weather conditions, might extend downwind to 5 kilometres and the consequences would be proportionately greater than in the case of a single weapon.

14. In either case in the longer term people might not be able to live or work safely in certain areas until these had been decontaminated.

15. Dispersal of fissile material in or on the sea would have much less significant consequences for health than an accident on land.

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1. OD(SA) (82) 3rd meeting invited the Ministry of Defence to review the options available for the removal of nuclear weapons from the task group without detriment to its main objectives.
2. Nuclear weapons for use in the anti-submarine role are on board HM Ships INVINCIBLE, HERMES, BROADSWORD and BRILLIANT. *(They are capable)*
The options available for removing the weapons are set out in detail at Annex A. Briefly, the only option which appears practicable is to offload the weapons onto Ascension Island and then return them by air to the UK. The estimate is that this operation would delay the task group: planned timetable for deployment to the Falklands by 36 hours. *at least* There would also be increased safety risks involved. *The risk to a major ops*
3. The ~~arguments~~ *arguments centre around possible* in favour of removal of the weapons rest both upon potential public and international reaction, ~~should~~ *the risks* ~~their presence become known and, perhaps more importantly,~~ *and timing of possible ops* ~~and~~ *and* upon judgements as to their ~~likely~~ *possible* fate in the course of any hostilities.

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4. Were any of the 4 HM Ships of the task group carrying nuclear weapons to enter territorial waters 3 miles round the Falkland Islands, South Georgia or the South Sandwich Islands (as will be almost inevitable if military action occurs), we should immediately be in breach of our obligations under the Treaty of Tlatelolco. Should this breach of a Treaty undertaking become known, there would be a widespread international outcry, and our moral position in the dispute, upon which much world support for our cause rests, would be seriously undermined.
5. Leaving aside the question of Treaty obligations, if it were to become known or widely suspected that HM Ships were deploying nuclear weapons in the task group, there could be widespread public misunderstanding, both here and abroad, of the reasons for the presence of the weapons. We should almost certainly be accused of being prepared to use them against Argentina. The fact that we should not be able to comment on the nature of the weapons without setting a damaging precedent would leave the field open for speculation that they may be intended for use by Sea Harrier aircraft against targets on the Argentine mainland.
6. If one of HM Ships carrying nuclear weapons were to be damaged or sunk during the course of hostilities and the weapons it was carrying were damaged there would be a possibility that fissile material would be released into the environment. We should be under strong moral pressure to declare the area of the incident as an actual or potential radiological hazard. This itself could cause major international criticisms, and any actual release of significant quantities of fissile material from the

weapons would be very damaging to international opinion.

7. The most vulnerable magazines are those in the Type 22 Frigates. A direct hit with Exocet on the magazine would probably cause fragment penetration of the warhead and lead to radioactive release. The risk of a similar situation in HMS HERMES, with its dedicated armour protected magazine deep in the ship, is assessed as minimal from Exocet and only moderate from a torpedo or mine. The magazine in HMS INVINCIBLE is also deep but is not so well protected and contains a mixture of torpedoes and nuclear weapons. The risk in HMS INVINCIBLE is thus slightly greater than in HERMES because of the effect that detonation of torpedo warheads would have on their colocated nuclear ones. The RFAs have dedicated magazines deep in the ship and the risks are similar to INVINCIBLE.

8. It is also conceivable that weapons might fall into the hands of the Argentines, ^{for example,} by salvage ^{from} of one of HM Ships ~~that had~~ ^{on board} been sunk, ^{stowed} or by outright ~~physical~~ capture. The consequences of this would be highly undesirable and the acquisition of UK nuclear weapon technology in this way ^{by} a State which has no such weapons might well prejudice the special Anglo-US relationship in these matters.

9. The implication for our nuclear stockpile of the loss of either HERMES or INVINCIBLE would be ~~extremely~~ serious, since the ships are carrying approximately 40% and 25% respectively of our entire stockpile of nuclear depth bombs.

10. The principal short-term argument against removal of the weapons is, as has been mentioned, the delay involved. It is estimated that the lift of weapons by helicopter to shore would conflict with the heavy storing programme for the ships presently planned for only

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a 24 hour stopover. CINCFLEET estimates a further 36 hours would be required to complete the total operation with subsequent ^{mean disembarking} prejudice to operations in the Falkland Islands.

Disembarkation of weapons by night is not authorised because of the additional hazards involved and would require special authorisation from Ministers. ^{How much}

11. It is possible that at the same time as the current operation, a state of tension with the Soviet Union might develop. The removal of the weapons would make the re-deployment of the ships for NATO tasks dependant on first re-embarking their nuclear weapons. This could cause a delay in their deployment and necessitate a return to a UK port unless we were prepared to re-embark the weapons at sea. To take the latter course in tension would be highly visible to the Soviets who could be expected to be marking our ships. However since the stock carried in the Group represents a high proportion of our total stockpile it could be argued that some of them should be returned to UK thus making them available for use by the ships which still remain within NATO area.

12. So far as the longer term is concerned, although we should take every step to keep the operation covert, it is possible that total ~~or partial~~ removal of the weapons would become known. This could give rise to a number of problems. Although we admit freely that RN helicopters and Sea Harriers have the capability to deploy nuclear weapons (for example, in SDE 81) and it is therefore a relatively simple deduction to establish which classes of ships are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, we have never admitted that such weapons are carried in the ships in peacetime. International knowledge of this might well be damaging and could jeopardise future visits by RN ships of the

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same (or other) classes to foreign ports. We have consistently refused either to confirm or deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons on board HM Ships making such visits in the past, even when pressed strongly by the host Government. In the extreme case of the Seychelles this has led to their refusing access to our ships (and the Egyptians have recently asked whether visiting ships are carrying nuclear weapons or other radioactive material). Were potential host Government to operate on the presumption that our ships were carrying nuclear weapons, we could find a greater number of foreign ports closed to us. Furthermore, the movement towards the establishment of "nuclear weapon force zones" is likely to increase rather than diminish, which could lead to the presence of RN ships giving rise to increasing controversy.

13. The Chiefs of Staff believe

14. Ministers are invited to ^{consider the} ~~note~~ arguments for and against recovering nuclear weapons from the task group. ^{and determine}