

The United States Sale of Trident to Britain: Deal Making in the Anglo-American Nuclear Relationship

Suzanne Doyle

Abstract. This article provides a comparative analysis of the sales of the Trident nuclear missile system to Britain by the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations. Both governments viewed the Anglo-American nuclear partnership as a tool within their wider foreign policy kit and utilised the sale of Trident to influence British defence policy. For these reasons, each administration saw the Trident sale as part of an Anglo-American transactional defence relationship. This exegesis deepens understanding of the United States perspective on Anglo-American nuclear co-operation. Moreover, it is relevant to current debates on the replacement of Trident because it highlights the ramifications of Britain's technical dependence and raises questions about the concessions that may have been made, or will need to be made, to the United States in exchange for the latter's assistance with replacement.

United States assistance is essential to Britain's nuclear programme. The British nuclear force currently consists of four Vanguard-class submarines each capable of carrying up to 16 Trident D5 (II) ballistic nuclear missiles.¹ The United States produces, supplies, and services these missiles, and it provides the software used for targeting and firing the Trident. Indeed, Britain does

not own any individual missiles but leases them under the terms of the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement [PSA]. This arrangement is the latest chapter in the Anglo-American nuclear relationship by which Britain acquired the Polaris Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile system in the 1960s. In 1980, the agreement was amended to allow the purchase of the Trident C4 (I) system and was further amended in 1982 to authorise the acquisition of the more advanced Trident D5 in place of the C4.² Nevertheless, how the British government came to agreement with the United States to purchase the Trident system has received little scholarly attention.³

Both the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations were consistently pragmatic about supplying Trident to Britain and only consented to do so when the arrangement suited Washington. Nevertheless, British officials encountered more uncertainty in their negotiations with the Carter Administration over Trident C4 than in their discussions with the Reagan Administration concerning the supply of Trident D5. This situation was because there was a greater convergence between the supply of Trident and Reagan Administration foreign policy interests than was present with the Carter White House. However, the Carter and Reagan administrations acted in a similar manner throughout the C4 and D5 negotiations; both sets of American officials drove a hard bargain to derive the greatest possible benefit from the sale, and they utilised negotiations over the price of the missile system to influence wider British defence policy. In this way, both administrations saw the sale of Trident as a tool to both re-enforce the political and conventional strength of the Western alliance and strengthen Western nuclear deterrence. Understanding the nature and terms of the Trident negotiations only occurs when placed in the wider context of transatlantic defence relations. As such, the Carter and Reagan administrations viewed nuclear co-operation as part of a transactional defence connexion whereby the United States saw the relationship as a tool within its wider foreign policy kit. The agreement of the United States to supply Trident was dependent upon its alignment with broader American defence policy

goals and both administrations sought, and expected, defence commitments from Britain in return for American assistance with its nuclear programme.

In turn, this conceptualisation deepens an understanding of the Anglo-American nuclear partnership. Nuclear co-operation is often seen as the “heart” of the Anglo-American relationship and, as such, an essential factor in the maintenance of close relations in other areas.⁴ This exegesis builds upon these insights by demonstrating that the nuclear relationship does not exist on a separate and distinctive plane from the wider defence partnership – nor is the continuation of nuclear co-operation inevitable due to the reductive logic of deterrence. Moreover, this analysis is of contemporary relevance in current debates over the replacement of Trident. A 2006 British government White Paper, “Future of the United Kingdom’s Deterrent”, asserted, “The US has never sought to exploit our procurement relationship in this area as a means to influence UK foreign policy”.⁵ This assertion is demonstrably untrue.

In September 1979, MISC 7, a Cabinet committee chaired by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, decided to push for an Anglo-American agreement on the sale of Trident C4 by December 1979 so that Britain could replace its ageing Polaris nuclear system.⁶ Due to British technical dependence on the Americans for nuclear missiles, the committee’s options were mostly constrained to United States delivery systems lest London chose to pursue options that were more expensive. Thankfully for the Cabinet committee, at the Guadeloupe summit in January 1979, Carter had already assured the former prime minister, James Callaghan, of his willingness to consider the supply of Trident C4.⁷ However, despite Carter’s forthcoming attitude in Guadeloupe, the Thatcher government did not receive its desired Trident C4 agreement by December 1979. Indeed, throughout 1979 and early 1980, it remained uncertain whether a final Trident deal would come to fruition. Only when the Carter Administration judged that the advantages of the sale of Trident outweighed the disadvantages did the White House agree to finalise the deal.

Any sale of Trident would only be of modest benefit to the Carter Administration. In its first few years, the Carter White House prioritised arms control and human rights, not the strengthening of nuclear forces.⁸ At the beginning of his term, Carter aimed to achieve deep cuts in American and Soviet nuclear arsenals. By 1979, these ambitions had moderated, but he nonetheless remained committed to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks [SALT] process – an earlier treaty, SALT I signed in 1972, limited missiles not warheads. Indeed, his political standing relied partly on its success.⁹ However, the Administration’s arms control talks with the Soviet Union had created unease in Western Europe about superpower strategic parity and undermined confidence in the American nuclear umbrella.¹⁰ As such, two policy priority areas that clearly had the potential to intervene with Polaris replacement were the political implications of SALT II and concern over grey areas within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO]. European unease about Theatre Nuclear Forces alongside the arms control process led to the development of “a complex relationship between Soviet strategic choices, the SALT II negotiations and NATO internal debate”.¹¹ British efforts to replace Polaris entangled these relationships.

During 1979, NATO officials struggled to gain a consensus on a “dual-track” response to member-states concerns over Soviet deployment of new SS-20 missiles.¹² Favouring the arms control element of the “dual-track” decision, the Danish, Dutch, Belgian, and Norwegian governments had been deeply hesitant about participating in future deployments of Long-Range Theatre Nuclear Forces [LRTNF].¹³ Alongside Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany, they were also reluctant to support a decision likely to be extremely unpopular with large sections of their electorates. As such, getting full NATO agreement on the “dual-track” approach was “a tightrope walk for the alliance”.¹⁴ An Anglo-American agreement to replace Polaris could upset this delicate balance, whilst any talk of replacing Polaris in addition to LRTNF deployments could heighten further anti-nuclear feeling within some constituencies of Western Europe.¹⁵ Distinctions

between “strategic” and “tactical” weapons, and the need to modernise both, could appear academic and nonsensical in public debates. As such, any rumours of a Trident deal could heighten many NATO governments’ concerns about domestic reaction to “dual-track”.

Simultaneously, Carter’s Administration worried that a Trident agreement had the potential to provoke a Soviet response that might stall Senate ratification of the SALT II treaty. During the negotiations, the Soviets argued that British and French nuclear forces, as well as forward-based ones in Western Europe, should be included in limits on central strategic systems. Moscow argued that all these systems were capable of destroying targets on Soviet soil, and subsequently, their non-inclusion would tilt the overall strategic balance towards the West.¹⁶ Although the Carter Administration had resisted these demands for including the British and French systems in SALT, the supply of Trident might cause a Soviet reaction. During the negotiations, the Soviets had also expressed fear that the United States would circumvent qualitative restrictions in the SALT II treaty by secretly transferring forbidden weapons systems or military technologies to NATO allies. To alleviate these concerns, the final settlement included a non-circumvention clause. Despite privately knowing that it was likely that the United States would shortly agree to sell Britain a new missile system, the Soviets would probably argue that the supply of a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle [MIRV] system – that weakened SALT I by having several warheads on a single missile – went against the spirit of non-circumvention. Consequently, the White House foresaw the possibility that the Soviets could react by making new demands for future SALT III negotiations. In turn, such a reaction could heighten Senate feelings of mistrust about Moscow thereby undermining support to ratify the SALT II treaty.¹⁷

These concerns over prospects for SALT ratification and NATO consensus on a “dual-track” decision influenced White House policy towards the Polaris replacement.¹⁸ Consequently, in October 1979, Carter informed Thatcher that the Administration would respond affirmatively

to a request for the Trident C4 missile system, but he asked for a delay until after the NATO “dual-track” decision in December.¹⁹ American officials also privately made it clear that the White House wished that any request for Trident would take place after Senate ratification of the SALT II Treaty.²⁰

Over the next months, White House desires to delay any Trident agreement until after the ratification of SALT heightened. On 4 November 1979, Iranian militants stormed the United States Embassy in Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage. The subsequent crisis dominated Carter’s foreign policy agenda until the end of his tenure and severely damaged his already-eroded national position.²¹ In one estimate, his inability to secure the hostages’ release made it “impossible to free himself from the aura of weakness that had come to define him”.²² By winter 1979, the Administration’s apparent mishandling of foreign affairs was undermining Carter’s presidency and threatening his re-election hopes in the coming year. Even his flagship foreign policy of the SALT II treaty looked set to fail, with most observers believing that the agreement would need further amendments to gain Senate ratification.²³ The failure of SALT would be a severe blow to Carter, who had invested considerable political capital in the agreement.

Subsequently, in December, his Administration made it apparent to the British that the SALT treaty, not Polaris replacement, took priority. On 17 December, Thatcher and Carter met to discuss the replacement of Polaris. Due to the impending 1980 American elections, and the resultant uncertainty over whether Carter’s promise to supply Trident would still stand, British officials hoped that Thatcher could secure his agreement in this meeting to move forward with formal negotiations over the terms of the sale.²⁴ Instead, the president affirmed his commitment to giving a positive response to any request for Trident but again asked Thatcher not to make such a treaty until after the ratification of SALT II by Congress at a theretofore-unknown date.²⁵

At the December meeting, Carter informed Thatcher that if Congress failed to ratify SALT II, “There would then be no obstacle to his agreeing to a request from the United Kingdom Government to a successor to Polaris”.²⁶ Consequently, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on 24 December 1979 raised British officials’ hopes that they would be able to finalise the purchase of Trident: the invasion was the death knell to the illusion of *détente*. Facing an election in which he was not even guaranteed the nomination of his own party, confronting the increasingly withering assaults of the growing conservative movement, and haunted by failure to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis, Carter needed to show strength in the face of Soviet aggression. He subsequently made every effort to punish them, including imposing a grain embargo, recalling the American ambassador, boycotting the Moscow Olympics, appealing to the United Nations and NATO for support, expanding defence spending, and withdrawing SALT II from Senate consideration.²⁷ In this way, the invasion was the final catalyst in the hardening of Carter’s foreign policy. By refocusing on containment of the Soviet Union, he largely abandoned what was left of his human rights and nuclear non-proliferation policies.²⁸

With SALT II’s ratification now delayed indefinitely, Downing Street officials began to probe their White House counterparts on whether Britain could now request Trident C4.²⁹ However, despite the indefinite delay of SALT ratification, Carter’s Administration was still hesitant to begin formal negotiations on the terms of Trident C4 supply; in the aftermath of the Afghan invasion, Carter’s political problems increased in turn and heightened White House concern about potential criticism from the sale of Trident C4.³⁰ Finally, in March 1980, the White House decided to begin formal negotiations on the terms of sale, a decision due, in part, to fear that any “leaks [from the British government] would be harmful politically and could endanger SALT”.³¹

In this way, the Carter Administration only agreed to finalise the sale of Trident C4 at a

time of its choosing and when agreement aligned with wider American foreign policy goals and domestic political considerations. Any Trident deal would only be of modest advantage to the Administration. As such, the White House neither viewed replacing Polaris as a central component in its efforts to change the dynamic of the Cold War, nor would it build the Administration's legacy, resolve relations with allies, or win votes. Subsequently, if a Trident agreement would hinder in any way such "priority" policies, the British could not rely on Carter's support. Only after the Administration had calculated that the benefits of any agreement outweighed the disadvantages did it agree to supply Trident within the frame of the approaching election. Nevertheless, the White House would now utilise negotiations over the conditions of the sale to ensure it derived the most benefit possible from the sale of Trident.

The Carter Administration's obstinate diplomatic tactics continued throughout the Trident C4 negotiations. In particular, it sought to utilise Britain's Research and Development [R&D] payment for Trident as a means to secure a substantive *quid pro quo*, a move not congenial or particularly in keeping with the supposed "special relationship". In March 1980, David Aaron, the American lead negotiator and deputy national security advisor, informed the chief British negotiator, Robert Wade-Gery, that the Administration was not prepared to accept the payment of a five percent R&D levy. In the 1963 agreement, concluded with the John F. Kennedy Administration, the British had paid this surcharge on the purchase price of each missile in recognition of American R&D costs incurred in developing the missile system. The Kennedy Administration, however, had not levied a charge *pro rata* to actual American spending due to an awareness that the more Britain spent on its nuclear capability, the less it could spend on its conventional forces.³² This logic persisted throughout the Trident negotiations. Nevertheless, after 1976, American regulations stipulated that the government had to charge an R&D supplement on a *pro rata* basis unless the president approved a reduction in the wider interests of the United

States. As such, American regulations now meant that the R&D levy offered White House negotiators leverage to secure their desired conventional commitments.

As such, Aaron made clear to Wade-Gery that to secure a reduced R&D charge, the British would have to provide America with certain commitments in return. The first was to re-draft the exchange of letters between Carter and Thatcher, which would formalise the deal, to include a promise that the British would spend the money saved, thanks to American co-operation, on strengthening their conventional forces. More controversially, the British would also have to agree to a “number of suggestions for defence cooperation” where Robert Komer, a former ambassador to Turkey and now American under-secretary of defence for policy, had been seeking agreement from the Ministry of Defence [MOD]. Aaron emphasised that the Administration would give the British a reduction in the R&D levy, “To the extent that we [the British] do what Ambassador Komer wants”.³³ If the British could “meet enough” of Komer’s requests, the R&D bill would be \$100 million; if they could “meet none of them”, it would be \$400 million; and if the British could “go some of the way”, it would be between the two figures.³⁴ As such, Aaron stressed that Carter’s Administration was prepared to act in a brazen manner to secure its aims. As Sir Robert Armstrong, the Cabinet secretary, outlined to Thatcher in his report on the Aaron-Wade-Gery talks, the Carter White House sought a transactional deal: “The United States Government is . . . looking to us for favours; but they are favours from which we shall benefit in terms of a reduction of the Trident price tag”.³⁵

The Carter Administration’s belief in the transactional nature of the Anglo-American defence relationship was evident once more when Frank Cooper, the MoD permanent under-secretary, and Wade-Gery met Komer on 16 April. Komer immediately endeavoured to drive a hard bargain and was even more forthright than Aaron was. Initially, Komer stated that the Administration believed that its co-operation on Polaris’ successor would save the British “perhaps

\$4 billion ie [sic] the cost of developing . . . MIRV capability”.³⁶ The Administration wanted three commitments in return. The first was a “satisfactory sentence” in Thatcher’s formal letter to Carter that Britain would spend its savings on “strengthening” British conventional forces. The second was permission to expand the American military base on the British-controlled Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia – it had increased strategic importance to the White House in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan due to the acceleration of American military capability in the Persian Gulf. Finally, there was a “hard offset” in return for reducing the R&D levy.³⁷

Komer’s demand for “hard offset” dominated much of the subsequent discussion. If America applied the *pro rata* principle strictly to the purchase of Trident C4, the British would have to pay the R&D levy of about \$400 million. In comparison, if Britain were charged five percent, as it was for Polaris, the cost would be about \$100 million. For Komer, there could be no compromise: “the United States Government could reduce this \$400 million charge only to the extent that they were compensated elsewhere in hard cash”.³⁸ Thinking that British provision of personnel for American Rapier anti-aircraft missile defences in Britain would generate “about \$200 million of such compensation”, Komer believed that there were “no other candidates for ‘hard offset’”.³⁹ As such, under Komer’s plan, the British would have to pay an R&D levy of \$200 million in cash. In reply, Cooper and Wade-Gery queried the assertion that only “hard offset” could secure a reduction. The British understood that Carter could approve a decrease in the R&D charge if he saw it to be in wider American interests. Dismissive of such a suggestion, Komer stressed that whilst Washington did have the power to waive R&D charges, “they only did so for projects which were strategically imperative for the Alliance. A British replacement for Polaris did not come into this. Indeed, there were those in Washington who regarded it as positively undesirable”.⁴⁰ Once again, a representative of the Carter Administration adopted an attitude that was not particularly in keeping with a supposed “special relationship”, nor indeed one that

displayed absolute belief in the utility of a British “deterrent” in the Cold War.⁴¹

Discussions on the terms of exchange continued throughout May and, by the end of the month, there remained “two major substantive issues . . . the financial terms of the sale [the R&D costs] and Diego Garcia”.⁴² After protracted negotiations, the British agreed to a watered-down commitment on conventional force spending, payment of a five percent R&D levy in addition to British provision of personnel for the Rapier systems based in Britain, and American plans for an extension of their base on Diego Garcia.⁴³

In real terms, these demands were not onerous, particularly in light of the savings the purchase of Trident afforded compared to the other options for the replacement of Polaris. It was not in the Carter Administration’s interest for London to spend an amount on its nuclear programme detrimental to the rest of its defence budget. Instead, Washington sought commitments to benefit its wider foreign and domestic policy aims but not financially harm the British. Nevertheless, whilst both sides thought the final deal beneficial, the process of coming to an agreement was not congenial or particularly in keeping with the supposed “special relationship”. In particular, American officials openly discussed utilising Trident as “leverage” to secure British agreement to their plans for Diego Garcia. As one American official reflected after completion of the deal: the “Diego-Trident package [was] now in place”.⁴⁴ In this way, Carter’s White House treated the Anglo-American nuclear relationship as coolly transactional in nature.

In summer 1980, the Thatcher government believed Britain had made the final decision on Polaris replacement. However, this was not the case. On 4 November 1980, Reagan won the American presidential election on a platform of strategic modernisation. As such in 1981, Britain’s technical dependency on the United States left its Polaris replacement programme in limbo as Thatcher’s government waited for the new Administration to decide on whether to upgrade the Trident system. If the Americans decided to upgrade their strategic missile system, the British

would have to make the difficult decision of whether to settle for C4 or upgrade to D5. If it proceeded with C4, Britain would lose commonality with the United States when the Americans phased it out of service, in all likelihood only a few years after British deployment. The Chevaline project created in the late 1960s and 1970s to improve the lethality of British Polaris warheads had starkly demonstrated the enormous additional expenditure that would result from such a loss of commonality.⁴⁵ There were also drawbacks to choosing D5. Whilst offering better range, accuracy, and warheads than C4, the more advanced system came with an increased price tag and, for Britain to purchase the system, it would have to negotiate a new agreement with the Americans. However, in 1981, the immediate problem for the British government was continuing spending on advance procurement of C4 in the knowledge that this could be wasted expenditure.⁴⁶

Fortunately for Thatcher's ministry, the Reagan Administration made its strategic modernisation decision earlier than initially expected, due mainly to controversy over basing MX MIRV missiles.⁴⁷ Once deciding that the D5 missile would replace the C4 by 1989, Reagan did not hesitate to agree that the British could purchase it.⁴⁸ Subsequently, in August 1981, London received a formal confirmation that the United States would upgrade to D5 and that the Administration would be prepared to sell the system to Britain.⁴⁹

The convergence of Anglo-American defence policy interests meant that Reagan's Administration was more amenable to supplying Trident D5 than Carter's over Trident C4. This swift agreement was a clear demonstration of Reagan's support for the British nuclear programme. However, this decisiveness also chimed with the Administration's wider foreign policy goals as well as belief in the utility of Britain's nuclear force. A key consideration in the president's swift offer of Trident D5 was the risk of British nugatory spending on C4, as well as a belief in Washington, particularly the Pentagon, of the need for Britain to maintain commonality with the United States.⁵⁰ Protracted delay on agreeing to supply D5 or, indeed, refusing to provide the

system would increase British expenditure on its nuclear programme at the expense of its conventional forces. Such a reduction in conventional spending was not in the interests of the Reagan Administration.

From 1981 to 1983, the Reagan White House took a confrontational approach towards the Soviet Union.⁵¹ Reagan believed that to meet the global challenge of the Soviet Union and thwart this perceived threat, the Western alliance needed to strengthen its nuclear *and* conventional capabilities.⁵² Moreover, alongside the Administration's aggressive approach on defence build-up, the White House concurrently viewed arms control as a low priority. Within such thinking, it did not matter that provision of the D5 system would likely undermine any on-going arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union.⁵³ Concern over the impact of a Trident sale on arms control efforts had been a primary reason for Carter Administration vacillation. With different priorities in his approach to the Cold War, Reagan did not face such political constraints. As such, the greater convergence between Anglo-American nuclear co-operation and the Reagan Administration's wider foreign policy interests facilitated the supply of Trident D5. In this way, its agreement to finalise a Trident deal came more swiftly than that offered by the Carter White House because it saw greater benefits to the sale.

Problematically for the British, the Reagan guarantee to sell D5 did not come with a reassurance that the provision would be on the same terms as agreed for C4.⁵⁴ If the Thatcher government decided to upgrade to D5, it would once again have to enter into detailed negotiations over the terms of sale. The British could not begin negotiations on the price of D5, or make a decision on whether to upgrade, until Reagan publicly announced his strategic modernisation programme in October 1981. After that, concern amongst members of MISC 7 over the possible price of the D5 system and the political difficulties its acquisition could cause delayed the British decision on whether to begin negotiations on the supply of D5.⁵⁵ Throughout these deliberations

within the British government, the Reagan White House did not provide assurances that it would offer D5 on similar terms to C4.⁵⁶ Instead, in January 1982, buoyed by its prevailing belief in the inherent need for a British “independent deterrent”, MISC 7 decided that Britain would proceed with D5 procurement subject to negotiations on price with the Americans.⁵⁷

In February 1982, the Trident D5 negotiations took place. Mirroring its Carter predecessor, Reagan Administration strategy from the outset sought conventional commitments in return for the sale of the Trident system at a reduced price. Before negotiations began, Alexander Haig, the secretary of state, and Frank Carlucci, the deputy secretary of defence, informed Reagan that they sought a reciprocal deal where, in return for reducing the R&D levy, they would ask the British to make commitments in geostrategic areas of concern.⁵⁸ In particular, the Reagan White House sought to reverse British commitments to cut conventional forces in the North Atlantic and the Indian Ocean as the United States “would . . . have to take up the slack”.⁵⁹ In this way, despite their greater support for Britain’s Polaris replacement, the Reagan team also planned to utilise Britain’s technical dependence to secure British commitments that would address American areas of concern outside the nuclear arena.

On 8-9 February 1982, the first round of Trident D5 negotiations began. Like the C4 talks, American officials drove a hard bargain and did not give the British reductions on the R&D charge freely or easily. Indeed, Wade-Gery, a central figure in both Trident negotiations, later recalled that the Reagan Administration was more preoccupied with *quid pro quos* than the Carter White House:

What struck us at the time . . . was how totally different it was from negotiating with the Carter White House. We went out, remembering . . . the previous negotiation, fully prepared with a whole raft of arguments about the moral issue and how it was perfectly all right to let Britain have this missile. We found the Reagan White House wholly uninterested in the

moral argument. They brushed all that aside and said, “Don’t give us all that crap. Don’t worry about that. What are you going to pay for these, and what are you going to do in return? How’s your policy going to be different, because, you know, if we’re doing this for you, we want to be paid cash and in kind”. It was a good old-fashioned haggle about how much we would pay and what we would do in return.⁶⁰

This “haggling”, primarily over the R&D levy, continued throughout the negotiations. In response to American requests for offsets in return for reducing the R&D levy during the second round of talks, British officials offered some limited adjustments to the MOD’s commitments. In reply, American officials saw these additional deployments as “No more than . . . [the British] could have been assumed to be planning”.⁶¹ Instead, the American negotiators laid out the Administration’s desire that in return for a discount in R&D charges, Britain delay the scheduled departure of HMS *Invincible* from Belize.⁶² In this way, the Reagan White House sought to utilise the sale of Trident to gain British assistance in the president’s geostrategic areas of concern – here, Central America. Administration efforts to ensure that Britain retained Royal Navy vessels was to appease Congress and a response to White House and United States Navy concern about the Thatcher government’s planned reductions in the British surface strength as outlined in Britain’s 1981 Defence Review.⁶³ By requesting that Britain retain *Invincible* – slated to be decommissioned – the Administration sought to use the Trident negotiations as a means to influence British policy in this area.

Similarly, Reagan’s wider foreign policy concerns influenced the American request that Britain retain all, or at least some, of its current combat forces in Belize for a further five years.⁶⁴ The White House was concerned over London’s plans to grant Belize independence by the end of 1981 and withdraw all British combat forces.⁶⁵ Thatcher’s government wished to reduce the economic costs of Britain’s remaining colonies. However, neighbouring Guatemala still claimed

the territory of Belize. As such, United States policy-makers feared that British withdrawal could increase Belize-Guatemalan tensions, contribute to regional instability, and impede American efforts to suppress the perceived communist threat across South America.⁶⁶

British officials responded strongly to these attempts to influence their defence policy, and after a further day of negotiation, the two sides reached an extremely favourable deal for the British; indeed, a deal that was more favourable in its terms than the Trident C4 agreement.⁶⁷ British officials secured a reduction in the R&D charge by promising to maintain the naval assault ships, *Fearless* and *Intrepid*, also condemned under the 1981 Defence Review, rather than the *Invincible*, which the British had offered to the Australian government to purchase.⁶⁸ On the subject of Belize, American negotiators were happy to accept the British training plans for Belize's forces.⁶⁹ As such, British officials secured a levy reduction without additional commitments in real terms, as London had already decided to reverse their decision to decommission the two ships'.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the Reagan Administration conduct throughout the negotiations displayed a similarly to Carter's: it viewed the Anglo-American nuclear relationship in transactional terms. Whilst the final Trident D5 agreement was extremely favourable to the British, the Reagan Administration offered to sell D5 at a substantially reduced price because of the convergence of Anglo-American interests rather than notions of "specialness". It was in American interests to reduce British costs and thereby ensure Britain's continued commitment to Western conventional and nuclear defence. Nevertheless, even though a deal favourable to the British was in the interests of the United States, the Reagan White House continued to drive a hard bargain until the final day of the Trident negotiations as it pushed for conventional British commitments in return for a reduction in D5 costs. As such, at the same time as wishing to strike a favourable deal with the British, Reagan's Administration saw the negotiations as an opportunity to get as much assistance as possible in their particular areas of concern. American officials, once again, took a hard-nosed

approach to negotiations on Trident to shape Britain's defence strategy to their benefit as much as possible – and without conversely damaging the wider benefits that the United States derived from the nuclear relationship: British contributions to NATO and Western defence.

Both the Carter White House and the Reagan Administration viewed the nuclear relationship as a tool to secure the wider defence interests of the United States and the Western alliance. United States policy-makers only agreed to supply the Trident system when the situation suited the White House. Moreover, both Administrations utilised the Trident negotiations as a means to influence wider British defence policy and expected British commitments in other key areas of shared defence policy in exchange for Trident. In this way, both the Reagan and Carter administration's viewed Anglo-American nuclear co-operation as inseparable from the wider defence relationship. United States supply of Trident was not about ensuring that Britain stayed in the nuclear game *per se*, but it provided means to re-enforce the nuclear, conventional, and political strength of the Western alliance through an Anglo-American transactional defence relationship.

This analysis is not about whether Britain's nuclear force is independent or dependent, or Britain subservient or not subservient to the United States. The Anglo-American nuclear relationship is more complicated than such binaries. Whilst American policy-makers utilised Britain's technical dependence to influence British defence policy, it is important to remember the Thatcher government's perspective: British negotiators pushed back in areas unacceptable to the government, secured a cut-price missile system that ensured the continuation of Britain's "independent deterrent", and made conventional contributions to a United States-led Western security architecture that was to their advantage. Nevertheless, the transactional nature of the Anglo-American nuclear relationship is important to understand because it has remained mostly concealed from those outside the small circle of government decision-makers. American and British officials agreed that the link between Diego Garcia and the sale of Trident C4, and then the

retention of *Fearless* and *Intrepid* and the sale of Trident D5, should remain unmentioned in the public announcements on the agreements.⁷¹ As such, the actual “cost” of the Trident agreements was not publicly revealed until the release of archival documents 30 years later. This transactional element of Anglo-American nuclear co-operation is not limited to the Trident accords. Research on the United States perspective of Anglo-American nuclear co-operation is relatively limited compared to studies explaining British decision-making on its nuclear weapons programme.⁷² Nevertheless, existing studies do suggest that both the Carter and Reagan administrations acted like various United States governments before them – taking a hard-nosed approach to the nuclear partnership to manoeuvre Britain’s defence strategy in line with their own strategic vision.⁷³ As such, it is clear that whilst Britain’s nuclear force may be operationally independent, Britain’s technical dependence comes at a price, one rarely discussed in policy debates on Britain’s nuclear programme or the current discussions on the replacement of Trident.

Notes

¹ A brief note on terminology. In this analysis, I refer to the two different Trident missiles systems as C4 and D5, rather than I and II. I made this choice because the former are the most commonly used terms; they clearly distinguish the two missiles, making it easier for the reader and better demonstrating the marked differences between them.

² Nick Ritchie, “The US-UK Special Relationship”, Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee Publications & Records (September 2009): <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmfaaff/114/114we12.htm>.

³ There are currently few published studies based on archival research on Britain’s replacement of Polaris with the Trident system. For a study of Britain’s decision-making on Polaris replacement, see Kristan Stoddart, *Facing Down the Soviet Union: Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons, 1976-1983* (Basingstoke, 2014). For discussion of Trident C4 negotiations within the context of broader Anglo-American relations, see Thomas K. Robb, *Jimmy Carter and the Anglo-American “Special Relationship”* (Edinburgh, 2017), 146-51. For analysis of Trident D5 negotiations, see Suzanne Doyle, “A Foregone Conclusion? The United States, Britain and the Trident D5 Agreement”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2016): <http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2016.1220366?scroll=top&needAccess=true>. Prior to the opening of the archival records, several scholars analysed the Trident decision in accounts that tended to over-emphasise the cordial nature of negotiations and the ease of reaching agreements. For example, John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke, 2006), 182-83; Robert M. Hathaway, *Great Britain and the United States* (Boston, MA, 1990), 115; Alan Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century: Of Friendship, Conflict and the Rise and Decline of Superpowers* (London, NY, 1995), 146-47; John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations 1939-1984* (Basingstoke, 1984), 181-85; David

Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century* (Harlow, 2000), 260; Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War* (Basingstoke, 1996).

⁴ See Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, 216; Andrew Pierre, *Nuclear Politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force, 1939–1970* (London, 1972), 316; Dumbrell, *Special Relationship*, 160.

⁵ United Kingdom Government White Paper, “The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent” (December 2006): https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27378/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf.

⁶ MISC 7(79), 3rd Meeting, “Cabinet Nuclear Defence Policy”, 19 September 1979, CAB [Cabinet Records, The National Archives. Kew] 130/1109.

⁷ “Prime Ministers Conversation with President Carter: 3:30 pm. 5 January, at Guadeloupe”, 5 January 1979, Callaghan to Healey, “Nuclear Defence Policy”, 17 January 1979, both PREM [Prime Minister Office Records, The National Archives. Kew] 16/1978.

⁸ Nancy Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter”, in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: The Endings* (Cambridge, 2010), 70-85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 74; Olav Njølstad, “The collapse of superpower détente, 1975-1980”, in Leffler and Westad, *Cold War*, III, 143; Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville, 1996), 155, 164; Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (De Kalb, IL, 2008), 38-39; Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford, 2016), 261-67; Wade-Gery to Armstrong, “Polaris Replacement: Dr Aaron’s call”, 30 November 1979, PREM 19/159.

¹⁰ Stephanie Freeman, “The Making of an Accidental Crisis: The United States and the NATO Dual-Track Decision of 1979”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 25/2(2014), 334; Kristina Spohr Readman, “Germany and the Politics of the Neutron Bomb, 1975-1979”, *Ibid.*, 21/2(2010), 264; Leopoldo Nuti, “The Origins of the 1979 Dual-Track decision – a survey”, in *idem.*, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev 1975-1985* (Oxford, 2009), 62; Kristina Spohr, “Helmut Schmidt and the Shaping of Western Security in the Late 1970s: The Guadeloupe Summit of 1979”, *International History Review*, 37/1(2015), 173.

¹¹ Nuti, “Dual-Track decision”, 62.

¹² For detailed discussion of the Euromissiles Crisis and difficulties over securing NATO consensus on the “dual-track” approach, see Leopoldo Nuti, Frédéric Bozo, Marie-Pierre Rey, and Bernd Rother, *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC, 2015).

¹³ Kristina Spohr-Readman, “Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics: Western Europe, the United States, and the Genesis of NATO’s Dual-Track Decision, 1977-1979”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13/2(2011), 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ See Maria Eleonora Guasconi, “Public Opinion and the Euromissile Crisis”, in Nuti, Bozo, Rey, and Rother, *Euromissile Crisis*, 271-86.

¹⁶ Olav Njølstad, “Key of Keys? SALT II and the Breakdown of Détente”, in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Detente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Oslo, 1997), 40.

¹⁷ Brzezinski to Carter: Daily Report, 15 October 1979, JCL [Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, GA] NLC-1-12-7-10-9; Cabinet Office “Note of a Meeting in the Oval Office, The White House, Washington DC, on Monday 17th December, 1979”, 19 December 1979, PREM 19/159; Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (NY, 1983), 139.

¹⁸ Throughout the SALT process, the Carter White House maintained that Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements with the Soviet Union would not prevent nuclear co-operation with Britain. See Hunt to Callaghan, “The timing of further consideration of the future of the deterrent”, 28 November 1977, PREM 16/1564; “Consultations with Allies on SALT and Western Security”, 2 March 1978, JCL NLC-16-110-7-9-6; Carter to Callaghan, 27 April 1979, Meetings – Vance/Brown/Brzezinski: 3/80-9/80, Brzezinski [Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, GA] Subject File Box 34; Vance, *Hard Choices*, 97-98. However, political considerations concerning SALT did influence American thinking on the supply of Trident.

¹⁹ Carter to Thatcher, 15 October 1979, JCL “Great Britain 6/77-12/80” Plains file, Box 2.

²⁰ Aaron to Brzezinski, “Letter to Thatcher”, 19 October 1979, JCL NLC-16-128-2-12-8.

²¹ Dan Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control: The SALT II Treaty Ratification Debate* (Columbia, SC, 1991), 110.

²² Mitchell, “Jimmy Carter”, 70.

²³ Odd Arne Westad, “The fall of Détente and the turning tide of history” in idem., *Fall of Détente*, 23. For discussion on the problems that Carter faced over SALT ratification, see Vance, *Hard Choices*, 350-51.

²⁴ Armstrong to Thatcher, “Future of the Strategic Deterrent (MISC 7)”, 4 December 1979, Cabinet Office, “Prime Minister's Visit to Washington 17 December 1979”, 12 December 1979, both PREM 19/159.

²⁵ Cabinet Office, “Note of a Meeting in the Oval Office, The White House, Washington DC, on Monday 17th December, 1979”, 19 December 1979, Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Joe Renouard and D. Nathan Vigil, “The Quest for Leadership in a Time of Peace”, in Matthias

Schulz and Thomas A. Schwartz, eds., *The Strained Alliance: U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter* (NY, 2010), 328.

²⁸ Mitchell, “Jimmy Carter”, 87; Sargent, *Superpower Transformed*, 288. For detailed discussion on the hardening of Carter’s foreign policy throughout his term in office, see Brian J. Auten, *Carter’s Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy* (Columbia, MO, 2008); Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY, 2009); Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*.

²⁹ See Armstrong to Whitmore, “Polaris Successor”, 21 January 1980, Wade-Gery to Armstrong, “Polaris Replacement”, 11 February 1980, both PREM 19/159.

³⁰ *Ibid*; Mitchell, “Jimmy Carter”, 84-88.

³¹ Brzezinski to Carter, “Daily Report”, 18 March 1980, JCL NLC-SAFE 17 D-26 32-11-7.

³² Andrew Priest, *Kennedy, Johnson and NATO: Britain, America and the Dynamics of Alliance* (Oxford, 1998), 56.

³³ Wade-Gery to Armstrong, “Polaris Replacement”, 27 March 1980, PREM 19/159.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Armstrong to Thatcher, “Polaris Replacement”, 28 March 1980, *Ibid*.

³⁶ Wade-Gery, “Polaris Replacement: Komer Negotiations”, 17 April 1980, *Ibid*.

³⁷ *Ibid*; “Diego Garcia and US Defence Policy in the United States”, 13 June 1980, “Diego Garcia and US Defence Policy in the Indian Ocean”, 4 July 1980, both FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office Records, The National Archives. Kew] 31/2754. The references to Diego Garcia are currently mostly redacted in the British archives – including within the record of the Wade-Gery and Cooper meeting with Komer. However, given documents in the Carter Library – see Notes 42, 43, 44, below – as well as material in PREM 19/417, it is reasonable to assume that Komer’s second request involved greater American access to the island. For discussion of Carter giving

priority to the Persian Gulf in 1980, see Sargent, *Superpower Transformed*, 288-89; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* (NY, 1983), 444-48.

³⁸ Wade-Gery, “Polaris Replacement: Komer Negotiations”, 17 April 1980, PREM 19/159.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For an earlier example, see Aaron’s discussion with Wade-Gery over the supply of Trident C4 in March 1980: Wade-Gery to Armstrong, “Polaris Replacement”, 27 March 1980, PREM 19/159.

⁴² “Agenda Paper: Meeting of the PD-46 Steering Committee, Strategic Nuclear Cooperation with Britain and France”, 29 May 1980, Meetings – Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski 5/80-6/80, Brzezinski Box 23, Subject File.

⁴³ See Wade-Gery and Hastie-Smith to MISC 7, “Future of the United Kingdom Strategic Deterrent: The Present Position, Note by the Secretaries”, 29 May 1980, CAB 130/1129; “Top Secret Annex to Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the United States Secretary of Defence”, 3 June 1980, PREM 19/159; Briefing Paper, “Notes for Meeting with the Vice President”, nd [circa 26 June 1980], JCL NLC-133-1-2-22-6.

⁴⁴ Briefing Paper, “Notes for Meeting with the Vice President”, nd [circa 26 June 1980], JCL NLC-133-1-2-22-6.

⁴⁵ Duff Mason Report, December 1978, DEFE [Department of Defence Records, The National Archives, Kew] 19/275; “Most Confidential Record to MISC 7(81) 1st meeting”, 24 November 1981, CAB 130/1222. In 1967, the British government chose not to purchase American Poseidon missiles but, instead, re-directed work at Aldermaston to the Super Antelope project, later named Chevaline; see Andrew Priest, “In American Hands: Britain, the United States and the Polaris Nuclear Project 1962-1968”, *Contemporary British History*, 19/3(2005), 366-67.

⁴⁶ Cooper to Nott, “UK Strategic Nuclear Force”, 19 August 1981, DEFE 24/2126.

⁴⁷ Chester J. Pach, Jr., “Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security”, in W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham, eds., *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and its Legacies* (Lawrence, KS, 2003), 95; James Lebovic, *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Baltimore, MD, 2013), 133-35.

⁴⁸ Gilmore, “Mr Weinberger’s Meeting with Mr Nott”, 21 August 1981, Thomas to Gilmore, “The Trident D-5 Decision”, 25 August 1981, both FCO 46/2751. The record of Reagan’s meeting with Weinberger is still classified. However, Reagan’s swift agreement is evident in that only four days after John Nott, the British defence secretary, outlined a British need for an offer of D5 to prevent nugatory spending on C4, Caspar Weinberger, the American defence secretary, secured the president’s approval.

⁴⁹ Weinberger to Thatcher, 24 August 1981, PREM 19/417. Reagan asked Weinberger to send this letter to Thatcher on his behalf; see Weinberger to Nott, 25 August 1981, DEFE 24/2126.

⁵⁰ Weinberger to Thatcher, 24 August 1981, PREM 19/417.

⁵¹ Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO, 2000), 3.

⁵² Idem., “Reagan and the Soviets: Winning the Cold War?”, in Brownlee and Graham, *Reagan Presidency*, 117; Fareed Zakaria, “The Reagan Strategy of Containment”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 105/3(1990), 380; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (NY, 1990), 194; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford, 2005), 349-53.

⁵³ Pach, “Sticking to His Guns”, 89; Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in The Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (NY, 2000), 111; Allen to Reagan, “National Security Council Meeting September 15 1981 – 4:00-5:00 PM”, 14 September 1981, RRL [National Security

Council Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA] NSC-0021 15 Sept 1981, Box 3, NSC: Meeting Files.

⁵⁴ Weinberger to Thatcher, 24 August 1981, PREM 19/417.

⁵⁵ Armstrong to Thatcher, “The United Kingdom Strategic Deterrent MISC 7(81)”, 11 January 1982, PREM 19/694.

⁵⁶ See Gilmore to Acland, “Trident”, 7 December 1981, Hastie-Smith to Wade-Gery, “The Polaris Successor”, 10 December 1981, Cooper to Armstrong, “Polaris Succession”, 18 December 1981, all FCO 46/2752; Hastie-Smith to PS/S of S, “Trident Costs”, 10 December 1981, Weston to Legge, “The Polaris Successor”, 7 January 1982, both DEFE 24/2123.

⁵⁷ Armstrong to Thatcher, 3 March 1982, PREM 19/695.

⁵⁸ Haig and Carlucci to Reagan, “Discussions with the British Concerning Purchase of the Trident D-5”, 6 February 1982, RRL UK (01/25/1982-02/11/1982 [Too late to file], Box 20, NSC: Country Files.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Transcript of interview with Robert Wade-Gery conducted by Malcolm McBain (13 February 2000), British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, 91-92: <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Wade-Gery.pdf>.

⁶¹ Wade-Gery to Nott, 25 February 1982, PREM 19/694.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Weinberger to Nott, 25 August 1981, DEFE 24/2126; Andrew Dorman, “John Nott and the Royal Navy: The 1981 Defence Review Revisited”, *Contemporary British History*, 15/2(2010), 98-120.

⁶⁴ Wade-Gery to Nott, 25 February 1982, PREM 19/694.

⁶⁵ See Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: US Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley, CA, 1991); Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*, (NY, 2007), 190-99.

⁶⁶ Bremer to Allen, “Briefing Materials for the Visit of UK Prime Minister Thatcher”, 25 February 1981, Briefing Book Re: Visit of British Prime Minister Thatcher 02/25/1981-02/28/1981 (2 of 3), RRL NSC: VIP Visits, Box 91434.

⁶⁷ See Henderson to Muskie, 30 September 1980, Christopher to Henderson, 30 September 1980, both DEFE 25/325.

⁶⁸ Wade-Gery to Nott, 25 February 1982, PREM 19/694.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Wade-Gery to Coles, “Trident”, 26 February 1982, PREM Ibid.

⁷¹ See Howe, “Polaris successor: Q&A material, Note of points raised in discussion with US officials 10 June 1980”, 17 June 1980, DEFE 24/2124; Weinberger to Nott, 11 March 1982, RRL WH Office of the Press Secretary: Press Releases and Briefings 1981-89, Box 24, White House Staff Members & Office Files.

⁷² Much of the existing literature on Anglo-American nuclear co-operation focuses on British decision-making. For example Pierre, *Nuclear Politics*; Ian Clark and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The British Origins of Nuclear Strategy* (Oxford, 1989); John Baylis, “The 1958 Anglo-American Mutual Defence Agreement: The Search for Nuclear Independence”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 31/3(2008); Kristan Stoddart, *Losing an Empire and Finding a Role: Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons, 1964-1970* (Basingstoke, 2012); idem., *The Sword and the Shield, Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons 1970-1976* (Basingstoke, 2014); idem., *Facing Down the Soviet Union: Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons, 1976-1983* (Basingstoke, 2014). Fewer studies have drawn upon material deposited in American archives or considered, in any

great depth, the perspective of the United States. See Priest, *Kennedy, Johnson*; Helen Parr, “The British Decision to Upgrade Polaris, 1970-4”, *Contemporary European History*, 22/2(2013), 253-74; Thomas Robb, “Antelope, Poseidon or a Hybrid: The upgrading of the British Strategic Nuclear Deterrent”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33/6(2010), 797-817; Barton Bernstein, “The Uneasy Alliance: Roosevelt, Churchill and the Atomic Bomb, 1940–1945”, *Western Political Quarterly*, 29/2(1976), 202-20; David James Gill, *Britain and the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy, 1964-1970* (Stanford, CA, 2014).

⁷³ See Bernstein, “Uneasy Alliance”; Priest, *Kennedy, Johnson*, 44-46; Thomas Robb, *A Strained Partnership? US-UK Relations in the Era of Détente, 1969-77* (Manchester, 2013), 73-127; Jonathan Colman, *A “Special Relationship”? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American Relations “at the summit”, 1964-68* (Manchester, 2004), 75-99; R. Gerald Hughes and Thomas Robb, “Kissinger and the Diplomacy of Coercive Linkage in the ‘Special Relationship’ between the United States and Great Britain, 1969-1977”, *Diplomatic History*, 37/4(2013), 861-905.