

'A Matter of Joint Decision': The Origins of British Nuclear Retaliation Procedures and the Murphy–Dean Agreement of 1958*

On 9 June 1958, in Washington DC, Harold Macmillan, the British prime minister, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, the US president, put their initials to a secret Anglo-American agreement which was designed to codify the procedures to be followed in the event that a decision was to be made to use US nuclear forces based in Britain, or certain British forces which were equipped with US nuclear warheads.¹ The essence of the agreement was that the decision would be a joint one, reached after direct consultation between the heads of government. The details of the agreement had been finalised two days before in talks between Robert Murphy, the US Deputy Under-Secretary of State, and Sir Patrick Dean, a superintending under-secretary at the Foreign Office who chaired the UK Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).

The so-called Murphy–Dean Agreement usually receives only a passing mention in works dealing with the period.² There has been no attempt, for example, to provide an account of its origins, or the process that led to its drafting. In the literature on the Anglo-American nuclear relationship, Murphy–Dean is often overshadowed by the Agreement on Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes (commonly known as the Mutual Defence Agreement) of July 1958, which has underpinned the close and intimate exchange of nuclear information and technologies between the United States and the UK ever since.³ Yet the earlier Murphy–Dean Agreement deserves

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1. See *The Macmillan Diaries*, II: *Prime Minister and After, 1957–1966*, ed. P. Catterall (London, 2011), p. 126 (9 June 1958); H. Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956–1959* (London, 1971), p. 494; Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], FO 371/135636, record of first meeting held in the White House on Monday, 9 June 1958, at 3 p.m., item 6.

2. See, in particular, S.R. Twigge and L.V. Scott, 'Learning to Love the Bomb: The Command and Control of British Nuclear Forces, 1953–1964', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxii (1999), pp. 29–53. This article mentions Murphy–Dean only briefly and concentrates on the early 1960s. The authors' longer-length study discusses the Agreement but without the benefit of more recent documentary releases, while it also contains several inaccuracies (for example, giving the date of Eisenhower and Macmillan's endorsements as 12 June): S.R. Twigge and L.V. Scott, *Planning Armageddon: Britain, the United States and the Command of Western Nuclear Forces, 1945–1964* (London, 2000), pp. 115–18.

3. For the Mutual Defence Agreement of July 1958, see J. Baylis, 'Exchanging Nuclear Secrets: Laying the Foundations of the Anglo-American Nuclear Relationship', *Diplomatic History*, xxv

greater attention—not least because behind its compilation lay the first attempts by the British government to specify the UK's own national procedures for authorising nuclear retaliation. In many respects, it also represented the culmination of a process which had begun in 1951, when the first understandings had been reached over nuclear consultation between London and Washington; after 1958, moreover, the Agreement was periodically reaffirmed and updated by high-level exchanges initiated from the British side as new US presidents assumed office, indicating its lasting significance for aspects of the subsequent Anglo-American nuclear relationship.⁴

This article therefore presents a detailed picture of why the Murphy–Dean Agreement came about, and the importance it has for readings of the nature of Britain's nuclear independence in the late 1950s as the UK's own V-bomber force began to enter service. The secrecy surrounding the Agreement has in the past created barriers to assessing its contents and providing the background to its negotiating history. The US authorities first released a partially excised version of the accord in 1997, and in late 1999 a full version became available at the Eisenhower Presidential Library; meanwhile, another partially redacted copy was released at the UK National Archives (TNA) at Kew, allowing a complete document finally to be assembled by combining the US and UK releases.⁵ The incoherent nature of the declassification process in both Britain and the United States is underlined by fact that in more recent years TNA has seen the belated release of key Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office files connected with Murphy–Dean, while at the same time Ministry of Defence files on the subject still remain withheld over sixty years after the event. These new sources, combined with insights

(2001), pp. 33–61; J. Baylis, 'The 1958 Anglo-American Mutual Defence Agreement: The Search for Nuclear Interdependence', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxxi (2008), pp. 425–66; M. Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent, I: From the V-Bomber Era to the Arrival of the Polaris, 1945–1964* (London, 2017), pp. 114–18.

4. For example, the Agreement had to receive a thorough update to accommodate the arrival of US cruise missiles at bases in the UK in 1983; see K. Stoddart, *Facing down the Soviet Union: Britain, the USA and Nuclear Weapons, 1976–1983* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 213–21; TNA, PREM 19/979, Armstrong minute for Thatcher, 'MISC 7: Basing of United States Cruise Missiles', 26 Jan. 1983; Heseltine minute for Thatcher, 'Control Arrangements for UK Based Cruise Missiles', and attached note, 25 Jan. 1983.

5. William Burr, at the National Security Archive, The George Washington University, has been instrumental in securing many of these releases under freedom of information legislation; see W. Burr, "'Consultation Is Presidential Business': Secret Understandings on the Use of Nuclear Weapons, 1950–1974', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 159, 1 July 2005, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/index.htm#29>; W. Burr, 'CIA Overreach? 22-Year-Old FOIA Request for 1958 Document Withheld in Full', *Unredacted: The National Security Archive Blog*, 18 Oct. 2016, available at <https://unredacted.com/2016/10/18/cia-overreach-22-year-old-foia-request-for-1958-document-withheld-in-full/>; [Deputy Under-Secretary for Political Affairs] Robert Murphy to the Secretary, "Joint Report to the President and Prime Minister on Procedures for Launching Nuclear Retaliation from the United Kingdom", 8 June 1958, enclosing "Report to the President and the Prime Minister", 7 June 1958, Top Secret', National Security Archive, available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21106-doc-5-1958-6-8-release-murphy-dean-3> (all accessed 26 July 2024). A full version was published as an Appendix to Twigge and Scott, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 326–33.

into nuclear planning gleaned from selected Air Ministry files from the period, allow a previously sparse documentary record to be fleshed out, while redactions which have now been removed indicate which areas of the Agreement were more sensitive to the official mind than others.

The new sources reveal that the Murphy–Dean Agreement emerged not from concerns over Anglo-American nuclear consultation as such but from the British government's initial pressing need during 1957 to draw up its own set of nuclear retaliation procedures, where none had existed before. This need derived from anxieties that within the compressed time available if the UK was under surprise attack, no orders would be given from political authority to allow the V-bomber force to escape destruction on its airfields. However, the enmeshed nature of Anglo-American nuclear planning that was already being formulated, the dependence of the Royal Air Force (RAF) on US-supplied weapons, and the presence of the US Air Force at bases in the UK, meant this effort soon developed into a set of procedures which would also have to involve the United States. The result was an agreement which ironically, and despite British protestations to the contrary, would in effect have sharply circumscribed any British prime minister's ability to take a decision to launch a national nuclear strike without reference to the US president, at least until the early 1960s when greater numbers of UK-produced strategic nuclear weapons were entering the stockpile.

The Murphy–Dean Agreement needs to be seen in the wider context of the evolution of the UK's strategic nuclear policy in the latter half of the 1950s. In the years following the Suez crisis of 1956, when the United States had exerted decisive pressure to undermine and reverse British policy and actions, the Conservative government led by Harold Macmillan appeared to give increasing prominence to the idea of Britain's nuclear independence.⁶ A month after becoming prime minister, in February 1957 Macmillan told his colleagues on the Cabinet's Defence Committee that it was necessary to have sufficient nuclear weapons under British control 'to provide a deterrent influence independent of the United States'.⁷ The Defence White Paper published in April 1957 made clear that, while Britain could make no more than a 'modest contribution' to the nuclear capacity of the West, it was argued that 'she must possess an appreciable element of nuclear deterrent power of her own'. Atomic bombs were being manufactured, the RAF's V-bombers had begun to enter squadron service, and the development of thermonuclear weapons was also under way.⁸

6. See J. Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1964* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 238, 241; A. J. Pierre, *Nuclear Politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force, 1939–1970* (London, 1972), pp. 95–101.

7. TNA, CAB 131/18, D(57)2nd mtg, 27 Feb. 1957.

8. *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1957, Cmnd 124, vol. xxiii, pp. 489–502, paragraph 15; see also M. Navias, *Nuclear Weapons and British Strategic Planning, 1955–1958* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 134–48, 188–90; Jones, *Official History*, pp. 46–8.

As well as enhancing Britain's international standing after the humiliation of Suez, an independent nuclear capability was touted as providing more influence over American Cold War policy. It was also presumed to offer some insurance against the possibility that the United States might be reluctant to use its own strategic nuclear forces to defend Western Europe once the Soviet Union's thermonuclear strength had been built up. In this eventuality the V-bomber force could offer the means, it was supposed, of unilateral nuclear action if Britain were to be left standing alone. Macmillan clearly felt that the fact that the UK had its own nuclear weapons programme compelled the United States to take notice of British views, telling a television audience in February 1958, for example, of his belief that it was:

[a] good thing we should have an independent contribution to the deterrent ... [it] gives us a better position with respect to the United States. It puts us where we ought to be, in the position of a Great Power. The fact that we have it makes the United States pay a greater regard to our point of view, and that is of great importance.⁹

However, alongside these aspirations for nuclear independence, the rising costs of the UK's nuclear programme, recognition that US nuclear forces provided the overwhelming source of the West's deterrent strength, and the long-held desire to co-ordinate strategic nuclear planning with the Americans, propelled Macmillan's government, as with its predecessors, towards the aim of restoring the close nuclear collaboration with the United States that had been severed by the McMahon Act of 1946.¹⁰

Self-sufficiency in developing and maintaining a nuclear capability was proving a prohibitively expensive business by the mid-1950s, especially for a power which still had to sustain substantial conventional forces and uphold numerous overseas commitments. Gaining access to US technical nuclear information, as well as special nuclear materials, held the promise of reducing the waste and duplication that might otherwise result if the UK continued to plough its own furrow. In a more general sense, Macmillan also hoped to shore up Britain's declining position on the world stage by engaging US power to serve British interests. As Suez had demonstrated, 'independent' action could be a hazardous undertaking, and Macmillan placed repairing Anglo-American relations at the top of his foreign policy agenda in an approach he termed 'interdependence', where British and US resources were pooled for common Cold War ends.¹¹ The crowning moment for

9. 'Prime Minister on Need for Hydrogen Bomb', *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1958, p. 3.

10. For cogent summaries, see M. Gowing, 'Nuclear Weapons and the "Special Relationship"', in W.R. Louis and H. Bull, eds, *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 117–28, and L. Arnold, *Britain and the H-Bomb* (London, 2001), pp. 35–9, 195–8.

11. See Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, pp. 323–5, 328–9; and see, for example, R. Aldous and S. Lee, eds, *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role* (London, 1996), p. 152; J. Turner, *Macmillan* (London, 1994), pp. 128–9.

these efforts was the conclusion of the Mutual Defence Agreement in July 1958, marking the revival of a close exchange of nuclear information between the United States and the United Kingdom, and an agreement which allowed Britain to adopt ‘anglicised’ versions of US warhead designs and to test its weapons using US facilities.

Scholars of Anglo-American nuclear relations have frequently discussed the tensions between the rhetorical emphasis placed by British governments on nuclear independence and the practical realities of increasing reliance on the United States for assistance with the development of warheads, and ultimately for the supply of nuclear delivery systems, the latter pattern established by the decision to purchase the Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile in 1960. When espousing the reasoning behind their attachment to a national nuclear capability, in the late 1950s British governments came to employ terminology which pointed towards the ambiguities of this position, so that strategic nuclear policy was said to represent ‘independence in concert’, or the V-bomber force to be making an ‘independent contribution’ to the overall Western deterrent. Lying behind such phrases after 1957 was the priority given to a joint approach to operational nuclear planning with the Americans, with Britain playing the role of a junior partner, combined with the theoretical option of unilateral nuclear action, designed as a last-resort retaliatory measure in the event of a direct attack against the UK.¹² Contemporary critics doubted that the circumstances would ever arise where such national use could occur. Nevertheless, during the late 1950s British governments attempted to deflect criticisms of their increasing dependence on the United States by pointing to the fact that Britain’s strategic nuclear forces still retained the power of independent action as a last resort, and that ultimately it would be the prime minister who would take such a decision. Turning a spotlight onto the origins and eventual terms of the Murphy–Dean Agreement, however, helps in appreciating the severe constraints operating against any such ‘unilateral’ British nuclear response.

I

The Murphy–Dean Agreement built on earlier Anglo-American understandings over nuclear consultation which had their origins during the Korean War. Having been host to US Air Force units since their arrival in the early phases of the Berlin blockade in July 1948, there was growing concern in Britain, once the Soviet Union began

12. See, for example, Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence*, p. 242; Navias, *Nuclear Weapons*, pp. 207–14; I. Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain’s Deterrent and America, 1957–1962* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 14–17; S.J. Ball, *The Bomber in British Strategy: Doctrine, Strategy, and Britain’s World Role, 1945–1960* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 60–66, 131–2, 147; R. Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality: Britain, the United States, and Nuclear Weapons, 1958–64* (London, 2010), pp. 32–6, 243–5; Jones, *Official History*, pp. 33–43, 50–54.

to build up its own nuclear capabilities, that such US air bases would become ‘lightning rods’, making the UK the principal target for Soviet attack at the outset of a general war.¹³ In December 1950, after Chinese intervention in the Korean War sparked widespread fears of US retaliation against the Chinese mainland, and that nuclear weapons might be used, Clement Attlee, the British prime minister, had flown to Washington for urgent meetings with President Harry S. Truman. Expansion of the Korean fighting or any ‘local’ use of nuclear weapons, it was believed in London, could draw in the Soviet Union on the Chinese side and precipitate a global war where Britain would be on the front line. Truman was ready to offer a personal and private oral undertaking to consult the prime minister if any US decision to use nuclear weapons were contemplated, but Attlee’s attempts to extract a formal assurance were rebuffed by US officials who were determined to retain their freedom of action in this fundamental area of national policy. However, in October 1951 the Americans did eventually concede that when it came to the specific issue of the US air bases in Britain, a British veto would in effect operate over their use. The loosely worded understanding that resulted noted that the use of American bases ‘in an emergency’ would be ‘a matter of joint decision ... in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time’. Public acknowledgement of the agreement, including its wording, was first given in a written answer delivered to the House of Commons by the then prime minister, Winston Churchill, on 6 December 1951, and further confirmation was provided by the reaffirmation of the same formula by its inclusion in the communiqué following Churchill’s January 1952 meetings with Truman in Washington.¹⁴

Nevertheless, how such a ‘joint decision’ was to be reached was never elaborated or clarified, even as the US Air Force’s presence in the UK expanded, and an early resort to the use of nuclear weapons became the bedrock of US and NATO strategy under the Eisenhower administration which entered office in January 1953. Indeed, the presumption of US war planning for the European theatre—as exemplified by NATO’s document MC-48, which was adopted by the NATO Council

13. The initial presence of the US air bases was regulated under a very loosely worded and informal ‘ambassador’s agreement’ reached in April 1950, but it contained no stipulation on how or under what circumstances they might be used; see K. Young, *The American Bomb in Britain: US Air Forces’ Strategic Presence, 1946–64* (Manchester, 2016), pp. 58–69, and (although containing a number of important contextual errors) J. Colman, ‘The 1950 “Ambassador’s Agreement” on USAF Bases in the UK and British Fears of US Atomic Unilateralism’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxx (2007), pp. 285–307.

14. See Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., House of Commons [hereafter *Hansard*], 6 Dec. 1951, vol. 494, col. 280W. For the overall background, see M. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952*, I: *Policy Making* (London, 1974), pp. 316–18, 412–14; K. Young, ‘No Blank Cheque: Anglo-American (Mis)understandings and the Use of the English Airbases’, *Journal of Military History*, lxxi (2007), pp. 1133–67; M. Jones, ‘Great Britain, the United States, and Consultation over Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1950–1954’, *Historical Journal*, liv (2011), pp. 797–828, esp. pp. 813–15.

in December 1954—was that US nuclear weapons would be used almost automatically in the event of overt Soviet aggression, even if such a Soviet attack were made with conventional forces only.¹⁵ Speaking to US military leaders that same month, Eisenhower said he would not allow Western Europe to be overrun, and indicated (even implying pre-emption) ‘his firm intention to launch a strategic air force [*sic*] immediately in case of alert of actual attack’.¹⁶

While anxious to preserve the US nuclear guarantee to Western Europe, America’s European allies exhibited considerable unease over the fact that they were likely to suffer the immediate consequences of any Soviet nuclear retaliation following an initial US nuclear strike, and that the Americans might cross the nuclear threshold quickly and without advance consultation. British nerves over the whole issue of consultation were not steadied when Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, travelled to Washington in March 1953 for his initial meetings with Eisenhower and the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Here Eden asked for a reaffirmation of the private oral assurances which had previously been given by Truman to Attlee in 1950 (and were repeated to Churchill on his visit to the American capital in January 1952) that there would be consultation with Britain over any decision to use nuclear weapons. To Eden’s evident surprise, Eisenhower gave a flat refusal to this request, the new US administration holding that there should be no special distinctions made between the treatment of conventional and nuclear armaments; or, as Dulles put it to Eden, ‘we should not allow a taboo to be put on inventiveness ... it was wrong to attach the stigma of immorality to any particular weapon’. Instead, Eden was simply offered an anodyne general assurance that there would be consultation with London if international tensions were to increase and war threaten.¹⁷

Despite delivering this rebuff, Eisenhower and Dulles were prepared to reaffirm the specific 1951 understanding over the use of American air bases in the UK requiring a ‘joint decision’ to be made between governments. Indeed, in October 1953, when it was proposed by US officials that the formula over consultation should be modified, and that advance consent—in other words, a blank cheque—should be sought from the British over use of the air bases for a nuclear offensive in the event of general war, Eisenhower demurred, saying:

15. See, in particular, M. Trachtenberg, ‘The Nuclearization of NATO and U.S.–West European Relations’, in M. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), pp. 153–68.

16. As quoted in M. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), p. 164.

17. College Park, MD, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 59, Central Decimal File, 711.5611/3-653, memorandum of conversation, ‘Use of United Kingdom Bases and Consultation with the United Kingdom on Use of Atomic Weapons’, 6 Mar. 1953; Dulles memorandum for Eisenhower, ‘The Eden Visit: Use of Atomic Weapons’, 7 Mar. 1953; Smith memorandum for Arneson, 12 Mar. 1953. TNA, PREM 11/431, Washington (from Eden) telegram No. 531 to Foreign Office (for Churchill), 9 Mar. 1953.

We could scarcely expect the British Government to hand over to us, in effect, sovereignty over portions of British territory by agreeing in advance, and in the absence of emergency, to allowing us to make the sole decision as to using these bases for an atomic attack on the enemy. If ... the British are to fight on our side as our allies, we cannot expect wholly to disregard their views on the use of these weapons and bases in a war which broke out in, so to speak, normal fashion.¹⁸

However, he continued:

The situation would be different in the case of a Pearl Harbor type of attack. We would then have to act at once. Otherwise we would discuss this matter with the British before launching our attack from bases in the British Isles.

Eisenhower's comments indicate that he did not appreciate that the 'joint decision' formula agreed in October 1951 was phrased specifically to cover 'emergency' conditions, where the time for taking decisions would be much compressed. In any case, the principle of consultation behind the formula still stood, although the conditions under which it might be invoked remained necessarily vague.

From the British point of view, the absence of an agreed way to have any voice in key US decisions more generally over whether and how to use nuclear weapons was unsettling for much of this period, as was lack of detailed knowledge of US nuclear planning. There was particular anxiety during the Indochina crisis of 1954 that US intervention to prevent French defeat by the Communist Viet Minh could trigger direct Chinese involvement which might in turn lead to use of American nuclear weapons against China, in a repeat of the dangerous scenario that had so worried the Attlee administration at the height of the Korean War.¹⁹ Similarly, concerns over US belligerence, and the possibility of a 'forestalling' attack against the Soviet Union, were in the minds of senior British ministers when the Cabinet took the final decisions to develop and manufacture a UK thermonuclear weapon in July 1954.²⁰ Only by demonstrating Britain's contribution to the deterrent strength of the West, it was thought, could the UK's position be taken into consideration by US officials and a restraining influence be exercised.

Important in this latter regard were British efforts to co-ordinate nuclear planning with the Americans as the V-bomber force gradually entered service in the mid 1950s. On one level co-ordinating

18. *U.S. Declassified Documents Online* (Gale), document no. CK3100568467, memorandum of discussion at the 168th meeting of the National Security Council, 29 Oct. 1953, available via <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/us-declassified-documents-online> (accessed 22 July 2024). Eisenhower's comments were expurgated from the State Department's volume in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series [hereafter *FRUS*] when a version of this memorandum was first published; see *FRUS, 1952–1954, II: National Security Affairs, Part 2* (Washington, DC, 1984), p. 568.

19. This is a key theme in K. Ruane and M. Jones, *Anthony Eden, Anglo-American Relations and the Indochina Crisis of 1954* (London, 2019).

20. See Arnold, *Britain and the H-Bomb*, pp. 55–7; Jones, *Official History*, pp. 31–2.

and combining the nuclear forces of the United States and the UK made straightforward military sense, especially to avoid duplication in targeting, ‘deconflicting’ the routing of aircraft, and allowing for a rational division of labour. In addition, it built on many of the strong service-to-service and personal contacts that had their origins in the Second World War and were sustained through the growing presence of the US Air Force in the UK, as well as through NATO ties.²¹ But co-ordinated planning would also, it was assumed, give British officials greater insight into how the United States intended to use nuclear weapons in any war and, by making the UK strategic force an intrinsic part of overall US plans, was another avenue whereby London might secure involvement in any decision to implement a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. Tentative talks between the RAF and US Air Force over the co-ordination of nuclear strike plans began in August 1956, around the same time as the Eisenhower administration made its first enquiries over stationing Thor intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) on British soil.²² Negotiations over both the basing of Thor missiles in Britain and Anglo-American nuclear strike planning were interrupted by the Suez crisis, but in January 1957, after Macmillan’s ascent to the premiership, outline agreements were reached in Washington on both subjects by Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Defence, and the US Secretary of Defense, Charles E. Wilson.²³ These were then confirmed when Macmillan met Eisenhower in Bermuda in March 1957, in another sign that there was a high-level determination to repair relations quickly after the rupture of Suez.²⁴

The Americans had consented to begin co-ordination of their nuclear planning with the RAF because by this period a tangible British nuclear capability was beginning to take shape; as one senior member of the Air Staff observed, ‘the American willingness to play ball with us is largely dependent on the efforts we have made and are making to build up a nuclear strike potential of our own’.²⁵ The first Valiant squadron equipped with the Blue Danube free fall bomb was declared operational

21. For an article that stresses the importance of service-to-service contacts before 1958, see S.J. Ball, ‘Military Nuclear Relations between the United States and Great Britain under the Terms of the McMahon Act, 1946–1958’, *Historical Journal*, xxxviii (1995), pp. 439–54. For this period, see also J. Melissen, ‘Prelude to Interdependence: The Anglo-American Relationship and the Limits of Great Britain’s Nuclear Policy, 1952–57’, *Arms Control*, xi (1990), pp. 205–31.

22. See Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy*, pp. 49–55; and, especially, K. Young, ‘A Most Special Relationship: The Origins of Anglo-American Nuclear Strike Planning’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, ix, no. 2 (2007), pp. 5–31. One Air Staff planning document from November 1956 mentions that integrating British plans with those of SAC was of ‘paramount importance’, though the goal was still a long way off; see TNA, AIR 2/13706, draft memorandum by D.D. Ops (B), ‘Medium Bomber Force—Preparedness for Global War’, 1 Jan. 1957.

23. See Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence*, pp. 251–3; and TNA, AIR 20/12508, Sandys to Wilson, 30 Jan. 1957.

24. Jones, *Official History*, p. 70. On the overall steps to restore relations after Suez, see J. Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations, 1939–1984* (London, 1984), pp. 88–94.

25. See TNA, AIR 20/11338, Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Policy) minute for Chief of the Air Staff, 7 Jan. 1957; confidential annex to COS(57)3rd mtg, item 7, 8 Jan. 1957.

in January 1956, and by the following summer the V-bomber force was starting to gather real strength, with eight Valiant squadrons now in the front line, and the first Vulcan squadron also entering service. In November 1956, in the wake of the Suez crisis, the Air Ministry began to prompt Bomber Command to draw up its initial national plan for use of the V-bomber force in the event of global war, including such aspects as selection of targets (with the Air Ministry now 'pretty firmly fixed on cities'), weapon and aircraft availability, deployment and dispersal, timing of missions, routes and levels of force readiness.²⁶

The arrival of greater numbers of V-bombers in 1957, and the measures which were starting to be taken to co-ordinate target planning with the Americans, prompted British defence officials to reconsider their own national plans and procedures for launching the UK's nuclear force, the details of which had hitherto been reserved to Bomber Command and the Air Ministry with little high-level oversight. Air Staff planners, however, always assumed that were a conflict to break out with the Soviet Union they would go to war alongside the Americans, and their papers from this period would note that clear decisions over the types of targets to be assigned to the V-bomber force were not possible until integration of plans with the Americans had been achieved.²⁷ The contingency of independent action—a unilateral national strike—was seen as extremely unlikely. It is instructive to note that when the Air Staff was first directed by the Chiefs of Staff (COS) Committee to compile a target policy for the V-bomber force at the end of May 1957, it was to be on the basis of two different scenarios, given in order, where the first involved retaliatory action co-ordinated with the US Air Force, and the second where action was to be on 'an emergency basis' when the UK was 'forced into unilateral retaliation'.²⁸

Compiling the latter 'national' plan, it is apparent, was a corollary to the immediate need for target planning which could be used in forthcoming discussions with the US Strategic Air Command (SAC). It was widely recognised that the UK's nuclear effort would be dwarfed by that available to the Americans, and in order for a British voice to be heard at all in combined planning it had to be demonstrated that the UK had developed a serious strategic nuclear capability. Air Ministry papers from June 1957 make it clear that assembling a 'national' target policy for Bomber Command was seen as an essential prerequisite before detailed co-ordinated planning with the Americans could begin.²⁹

26. See TNA, AIR 2/13706, Group Captain J.N. Tomes minute, 'Global War Target Policy', 15 Nov. 1956; Tomes to Group Captain P.H. Cribb, CMS 2982/56, 23 Nov. 1956. It is evident from this Air Ministry file that as of December 1956 an emergency war plan for the V-bomber force had yet to be compiled.

27. See Ball, *Bomber in British Strategy*, pp. 103–4, and TNA, AIR 2/13706, draft memorandum by D.D. Ops (B), 'Medium Bomber Force—Preparedness for Global War', 28 Jan. 1957.

28. See TNA, DEFE 4/97, COS(57)42nd mtg, item 3, 28 May 1957; and, in general, see Jones, *Official History*, pp. 50–54.

29. See TNA, AIR 20/11338, extracts from JP(57)10, 'Allied Strategic Attack in Global War in 1957 and Its Consequences', 15 Apr. 1957; draft Air Staff minute for Chairman COS Committee,

These kinds of assumptions would be shared by members of the COS Committee. The First Sea Lord, Lord Mountbatten, argued in September, for example, that ‘Our plans for coordinated action with the United States must be shown as having priority’.³⁰

A further background issue which meant that co-ordination of target planning with the Americans was increasingly seen as vital was the dependence of Bomber Command on US-supplied nuclear weapons. The severe limitations on the availability of fissile material and production capacity in the UK during this period meant that there were still relatively few British-manufactured atomic weapons available to equip the rising number of V-bombers entering squadron service. One Air Staff study gave the figure of thirty-five Blue Danube kiloton-yield weapons being available in January 1957 (of which only twenty-seven had been fully assembled and deployed to V-bomber bases).³¹ By March 1958, the UK’s nuclear stockpile would still consist of only about fifty Blue Danube and three Violet Club interim megaton-yield weapons (and only an additional fourteen megaton-yield weapons were scheduled for production in 1958/59).³² One consequence of this dearth of British-produced weapons was that the Air Ministry began to plan for greater reliance on US-supplied nuclear weapons for its Canberra light bombers and eventually the V-bomber force over the coming years, in a secret initiative known as Project E, and promoted by service-to-service discussions between the RAF and US Air Force in 1956. Because of the restrictions of US atomic energy legislation, such Project E weapons would have to be retained under formal US custody within special storage at RAF bases before being released for British use. Long in gestation, Project E began taking concrete steps forwards during 1957, in parallel with detailed Anglo-American staff talks aimed at co-ordination of nuclear planning—a memorandum of understanding on the latter subject was first drawn up between the RAF’s Bomber Command and the US SAC in June 1957.³³

Having already approved the conversion of a portion of the Canberra force to carry US weapons, in March 1958 the Air Council—the highest decision-making body within the Air Ministry—approved a paper which extended Project E to the V-bomber force, where it was hoped

‘Coordination of Strategic Plans with SAC’, n.d. but c. June 1957; Chief of the Air Staff comments at confidential annex to COS(57)72nd mtg, item 5, 23 Sept. 1957.

30. TNA, AIR 20/11338, First Sea Lord comment at confidential annex to COS(57)72nd mtg, item 5, 23 Sept. 1957.

31. TNA, AIR 2/13706, draft memorandum by D.D. Ops (B), ‘Medium Bomber Force—Preparedness for Global War’, 1 Jan. 1957.

32. TNA, PREM 11/2275, Brundrett minute for Sandys, FB/183/58, 31 Mar. 1958; and see also Moore, *Nuclear Illusion, Nuclear Reality*, pp. 78, 112.

33. See material in TNA, AIR 20/12508; and, for Project E in general, H. Wynn, *The RAF Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Forces: Their Origins, Roles and Deployment, 1946–69* (London, 1994), pp. 252–65; Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy*, pp. 144–7; Moore, *Nuclear Illusion*, pp. 98–9, 114; Young, *American Bomb in Britain*, pp. 200–217.

that seventy-two aircraft (out of a total planned front-line force of 144 V-bombers) would be adapted to carry one American weapon each. The first converted V-bombers were initially planned to be available in October 1958, but this programme was delayed until the spring of 1959 because of delays in the supply of British-manufactured conversion kits for the aircraft.³⁴ The extension of Project E necessarily meant that the V-bomber force's operational effectiveness would be partially dependent on US-supplied weapons for several years to come, with important implications for conceptions of nuclear independence and, as we shall see, for the terms of the Murphy–Dean Agreement.³⁵

II

British discussions in 1957 over compiling a national target policy for Bomber Command and co-ordinating action with the Americans coincided with concerns over the need to devise a set of procedures whereby the UK's nuclear force could be ordered into retaliatory action under conditions of surprise attack. In February 1957, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), Air Chief Marshal Sir Dermot Boyle, had written to his counterpart in the US Air Force, General Nathan Twining, saying that:

a vital point which is worrying us is how we can be sure that, in the event of war, the necessary political authority to launch the striking force can be obtained in time. Unless this can be provided for, any step we take to improve the readiness of the force may be nullified. I am sure this is an aspect which is also causing you concern and I think it is one which should be discussed between us.³⁶

During the initial years of the Cold War, transitioning the machinery of government in Britain to a wartime footing had been envisaged as a series of methodical steps, enabling key ministers to take considered decisions (transition procedures were laid out at length in the form of the Cabinet Office's 'Government War Book'). However, this process seemed ill-suited to the circumstances which would obtain in conditions of nuclear attack in the jet age, when the time for political decision making over how to respond would be minimal.³⁷

The possibility of a so-called 'bolt from the blue' surprise aerial attack, designed to cripple the nerve centres of the British state and inflict

34. See TNA, AIR 2/13789, Air Council memorandum AC(58)14, note by the Vice Chief of the Air Staff and Air Member for Supply and Organisation 'Project "E" for the V-Bomber Force', 17 Feb. 1958; AIR 20/10061, Air Council Conclusions 6(58), 6 Mar. 1958; on the delays, see AIR 20/10061, Hudleston minute, 7 Nov. 1958.

35. For UK dependence, see J. Bronk, 'Britain's "Independent" V-Bomber Force and US Nuclear Weapons, 1957–1962', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxxvii (2014), pp. 974–97.

36. TNA, AIR 2/13779, Boyle to Twining, CAS 485, 11 Feb. 1957.

37. See P. Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and its Holders since 1945* (London, 1998), pp. 111–18, for the transition to war planning during this period of the Cold War.

catastrophic damage with just a handful of high-yield thermonuclear weapons, was the scenario that most disturbed British governments in this period. The very start of a future war was likely to be the moment when critical decisions were required which could involve authorisation of nuclear retaliation, particularly if vulnerable nuclear forces at their air bases were not to be destroyed before they could be launched. Moreover, even when and if some strategic warning of imminent war were available—the Government War Book in 1956 envisaged a ‘precautionary stage’ before the outbreak of war lasting up to seven days—it seemed inconceivable to many officials that ‘retaliation’ would be authorised until confirmation of an actual Soviet aerial attack on the UK had been confirmed, probably through means of radar.³⁸ The anticipated development of medium-range ballistic missiles and IRBMs by the Soviet Union threatened to exacerbate the problem even further, when radar warning times of an attack might be reduced to a matter of minutes rather than hours. Considering the presence of the US air bases in the UK there was also a need somehow to reach an Anglo-American ‘joint decision’ on their use—as envisaged by the 1951 understanding—though how this might be done without the relative luxury of several days of transatlantic discussion and dialogue, and in the short time likely to be available, remained completely opaque.

British, Canadian and American intelligence officials had been discussing whether to establish machinery through which intelligence indicators of an impending Soviet attack could be shared since at least the start of 1955, but progress had been slow.³⁹ However, at their March 1957 meeting in Bermuda, Macmillan and Eisenhower settled on the need to devise a tripartite ‘alerts’ system between the United States, the UK and Canada, and an informal agreement along these lines was reached between the three states in May.⁴⁰ The lead British official for these post-Bermuda talks on intelligence alerts procedures was Sir Patrick Dean who, as well as having chaired the JIC since 1953, was also head of the Foreign Office’s Permanent Under-Secretary’s Department. This secretive part of the Foreign Office acted as a conduit to the intelligence services and contained an atomic energy section for handling sensitive military nuclear issues when they intersected with relations with other governments.⁴¹

38. On the ‘precautionary stage’ being triggered by strategic warning, see TNA, CAB 175/29, DTC(WB)(56)12, ‘Revision of the Government War Book: Report to the Defence (Transition) Committee’, 4 Dec. 1956.

39. Invaluable background on the evolution of an intelligence alerts system, much of it derived from recently declassified Canadian records, is provided in T.A. Sayle, ‘Indications of War: American, British and Canadian Intelligence Diplomacy and the 1957 Tripartite Intelligence Alerts Agreement’, *Intelligence and National Security*, xxxviii (2023), pp. 427–46.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 439–40, and TNA, PREM 11/2276, Macmillan note for Eisenhower, ‘Tripartite Alerts’, 22 Mar. 1957.

41. There are very few sources on Dean, who wrote no memoir and left no papers; see M.S. Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee, I: From the Approach of the*

In May 1957, at the same time as the tripartite intelligence alerts agreement was being finalised, the COS Committee had discussed an important study undertaken by the JIC and Joint Planning Staff which had looked at the scale of Allied nuclear attack that could be launched against the Soviet Union in the event of a global war. Among other matters, this paper had addressed the issue of the preparedness of the V-bomber force and highlighted the need for procedures which ensured it could immediately be ordered into retaliatory action if required. Air Chief Marshal Sir William Dickson, the chairman of the COS Committee, had observed:

If there was a period of increasing political tension before any Soviet attack was launched, it would be possible to take progressive steps to bring our forces to the necessary state of readiness and to make the necessary arrangements for obtaining a political decision to despatch them. On the other hand, in the event of a sudden attack without warning, it might be necessary for there to be some arrangement whereby authority was delegated so that the bombers took off as soon as an attack materialised.⁴²

Delegating authority for such a major decision as the launch of the V-bomber force was obviously a sensitive matter that would require high-level official consideration. The following month Dickson wrote to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, explaining the COS concern that, even after a time of tension, obtaining a rapid political decision to launch the V-bomber force when the Soviet Union was delivering a surprise attack would be difficult. Dickson wanted to draw Brook's attention in the fact that General Curtis LeMay, the head of SAC, appeared to have some delegated authority to order his aircraft into action under specific circumstances, and he thought this could be applied for the UK if a Soviet nuclear strike had disrupted communications with political authority.⁴³

Within the Cabinet Office, officials realised that the whole subject of arranging for a political decision to launch the UK's strategic nuclear forces would be intertwined with the ongoing work being done to establish a tripartite intelligence alerts and warning system, and that as a result Sir Patrick Dean should be brought into the discussion over how to respond to the concerns of the COS.⁴⁴ After a meeting between

Second World War to the Suez Crisis (London, 2014), p. 174; and W.S. Lucas, 'The Missing Link? Patrick Dean, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee', *Contemporary British History*, xiii (1999), pp. 117–25.

42. TNA, DEFE 4/97, COS(57)42nd mtg, item 3, 28 May 1957. For relevant extracts from JP(57)10, and JIC(57)15, 'Allied Strategic Attack in Global War in 1957 and Its Consequences', 15 Apr. 1957, see TNA, AIR 20/11338. Versions of the paper also received criticism for optimistic assumptions concerning how long the V-bomber force could be maintained at a high state of readiness; see TNA, AIR 2/13706, Group Captain J.B. Tait to ACAS(Ops), 'Allied Strategic Attack in Global War in 1957', 4 Mar. 1957; the full study has not been declassified.

43. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Dickson minute for Brook, WFD/151, 4 June 1957.

44. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Brook note for Hunt, 17 June 1957; Hunt to Dean, 27 June 1957; Dean to Hunt, 28 June 1957.

Brook, Dean and Dickson in July, it was agreed that a paper should be drawn up covering the arrangements that would need to be made to ensure that a quick decision to launch the UK's nuclear retaliatory forces could be taken.⁴⁵ The subsequent report on what was called 'the launching of the strategic reprisal' took until October to compile, and revealed the complexities attached to the whole issue. It made it clear that while the UK's own V-bomber force could then be ordered into action without consultation with other governments, authorisation would also have to be agreed with the US government for retaliatory attacks by the US Air Force units stationed at UK bases—it made little sense to devise UK-only procedures and remain oblivious to what SAC aircraft might also be doing (especially bearing in mind that Bomber Command and SAC were busy in 1957 discussing co-ordination of their target planning).

The working assumption was that the new intelligence alerts system which was being set up with the Americans and Canadians would give at least forty-eight hours' notice before a final decision on launching a nuclear reprisal would have to be taken, as this was the minimum period the RAF would need to bring the V-bomber force up to a state of sufficient readiness. In the absence of such a warning period, however, it was likely that the first indication of an attack would be 'the appearance of unidentified plots on Allied radar screens'. Such a 'bolt from the blue' scenario was considered improbable, but even if advance indications of hostile Soviet intent were received it was believed that a final decision to launch retaliatory forces would not be made until an actual attack was picked up by Allied radar networks, allowing very little time to take what was called 'the final momentous decision'. Gathering all the radar information available, Fighter Command HQ at Stanmore, it was predicted, might only provide at most an hour of warning. It was known that US Air Force units in the UK would be alerted if radar warning was received of an attack on the United States itself, but as the Soviet Union could be expected to synchronise its nuclear strikes, the estimate of an hour was unlikely to be improved upon. Without forces at a state of readiness it was thought that a decision to respond to such a surprise attack would be 'ineffective', making it essential that forty-eight hours of advance notice was given. It was apparent to the drafters of the paper that a request to launch a nuclear reprisal might, in fact, come in the first instance from the US government, and this raised the need for 'full accord between the two governments, something best achieved by personal communication between the Prime Minister and president'.

Where an advance intelligence alert was received of an impending Soviet attack by the JIC, it was envisaged that the prime minister should be quickly informed, along with the Cabinet Secretary, Home

45. See TNA, CAB 21/4757, Wilson minute for Brook, 5 Dec. 1957.

Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Minister of Defence and COS. The CAS should then issue orders to bring the RAF up to readiness, and a meeting of the Cabinet should be summoned, who would then decide what further measures should be taken in accordance with the Government War Book procedures. However, in a 'bolt from the blue' scenario, where HQ Fighter Command had received radar information about 'unidentified plots', the CAS should order the V-bomber force to take off but not to proceed beyond a specified line in the North Sea without further instructions. The CAS would then 'simultaneously' inform the prime minister and the same set of ministers and officials, who would arrange to meet. Meanwhile, the prime minister's private secretary was to arrange a call with the American president.⁴⁶

When shown the contents of the draft nuclear reprisal paper, Dermot Boyle, the CAS, was not altogether happy. Rather than bring his force to readiness on receipt of an intelligence alert of possible attack, he preferred to take 'unobtrusive' preparedness measures, as the former moves could be needlessly provocative. Similarly, he wanted more flexibility if a radar warning was received, accepting that the V-bomber force should be readied for take-off but allowing him to retain discretion on issuing final orders before aircraft were launched. If they did take off, then the captains of the aircraft were to proceed on their planned routes to their targets but would 'remain subject to confirmatory executive orders to carry on with their missions'. As this was occurring, the CAS would inform the prime minister of the latest time by which an order to proceed with an attack, or to order the aircraft to return to their bases, would have to be given. Senior ministers and officials would then have to meet, depending on the time allowed, and decide on whether to proceed.⁴⁷

Having received Boyle's views, which had also been endorsed by other members of the COS Committee, Cabinet Office officials were reluctant to reach agreement on a final version of the procedures. They could see problems with some of Boyle's suggestions, in that if the V-bombers were to proceed on their missions and be subject to confirmatory message from political authority, there was always the possibility that were communications to fail they might simply carry on to their targets (even if the radar plots turned out to be a false alarm). Instead, the original idea of a 'stop line' was much preferred, where the aircraft could not go beyond such a line unless they received a positive order. Moreover, and in any case, it was felt that until discussions had taken place with the Americans to make sure that procedures for launching nuclear reprisal aligned there was little point in trying to resolve the final points of detail. The Americans, it was noted by Cabinet

46. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Wilson minute for Hunt, 21 Oct. 1957, and attached draft report, 'The Launching of the Strategic Nuclear Reprisal'.

47. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Boyle minute for Dickson, CAS 3044, 25 Nov. 1957; Stirling to Wilson, WGS/489, 26 Nov. 1957; Wilson minute for Hunt, 26 Nov. 1957.

Office officials in early December 1957, had been reluctant to divulge their own approach to the issue of how a political decision over nuclear use would be reached, but now that an intelligence alerts system was in the process of being set up it seemed only logical to share British thinking on the subject and ask for comment.⁴⁸

The October 1957 Cabinet Office report on the launching of the strategic reprisal represented the first effort by senior British government officials to codify the procedures by which British nuclear forces would be ordered into action by political authority. The prime minister would clearly be central to the process, but the CAS was also accorded a key role in ensuring that the deterrent force was not caught on the ground by a sudden and surprise attack. The arrangements were a recognition that the advent of nuclear weapons, combined with much more rapid means of delivery through the jet bomber, meant that emergency procedures were required if nuclear retaliation were to remain effective and so deterrence credible. Another precedent was also to emerge from the discussions in 1957 and those which were to follow—the involvement of a very small group of primarily Cabinet Office officials (including two future Cabinet Secretaries, Burke Trend and John Hunt) in devising such very sensitive procedures.

III

Any understanding of Whitehall discussions over the question of launching a nuclear reprisal, and the key matter of how the United States might be involved in the process, cannot be divorced from the public debates in Britain that were simultaneously occurring during this period over the question of the US nuclear presence in the UK. During November 1957, a series of questions began to be directed at government ministers in the House of Commons by Labour Party MPs concerning the US practice of keeping some of their bomber aircraft in a state of high readiness for take-off or even on airborne alert, where they would also be carrying their nuclear payloads. The trigger for this was the leak into the public domain of a letter from General Thomas S. Power, the new head of SAC, telling his flight crews he intended to keep one-third of his force on continuous alert, and that warning time of enemy attack had shrunk to perhaps only a few hours.⁴⁹ One MP made the pointed query whether this meant that:

an American general could signal his planes [to attack] which were already in the air, and Russian and British cities could be devastated even before the British Cabinet had had time to meet? Who controls the fate of our country? If someone misinterprets a situation or a signal, will it not then be too late?

48. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Wilson minute for Brook, 5 Dec. 1957.

49. 'Strategic Air Chief Puts Third of Force on Alert', *New York Times*, 9 Nov. 1957, p. 10.

Having referred to the fact it was a Labour government which had first invited the Americans to re-establish their air bases in the UK, Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Defence, simply stated that there was a firm US promise not to use its bases in the UK without agreement ‘and we trust them’.⁵⁰

A few days later, Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, tried to fend off further Labour probes from Aneurin Bevan by referring to the 1952 Churchill–Truman communiqué, and, in an important distinction, affirming that this made the use of American bases a matter of joint decision, and not merely subject to ‘consultation’.⁵¹ On 28 November, Macmillan himself was asked similar questions, and reassured MPs that no American aircraft could be used from British bases without a joint decision of the two governments. This did not stop one Labour MP from making the observation that perhaps the 1951/2 understanding needed updating considering that the ‘leisurely days of the piston-engined bomber’ had given way to modern jet aircraft armed with thermonuclear weapons.⁵² By now the government was showing signs of discomfort; as Macmillan noted with irritation in his diary, ‘All the pro-Russians and all the pacifists and all the sentimentalists (inspired by the clever politicians) have tried to work this up into a sort of “finger on the trigger” campaign’.⁵³

The issue of prior consultation over nuclear use was, however, fuelled by further injudicious statements from across the Atlantic. In the aftermath of the Sputnik shock of October 1957 there had been renewed debate in the United States over the vulnerability of SAC aircraft to a surprise and disabling Soviet first strike. In private the Eisenhower administration had been in receipt of the alarming Gaither report in early November, in which SAC vulnerability was one of the critical themes—indeed, the readiness and alert measures being adopted by SAC during this period were a response to such concerns.⁵⁴ At the same time that the US administration was confronting the need for speed in response in launching nuclear retaliatory forces, pressures within NATO were building for greater consultation with its members over key decisions. During November, the German and Italian governments had indicated that they would use the forthcoming NATO summit meeting in Paris to propose that NATO’s political and consultative machinery should be tightened. Although open to the idea of prior political consultation, US officials were eager to stress that nothing should be agreed which

50. *Hansard*, 20 Nov. 1957, vol. 578, cols 367–8; and see ‘U.S. Bombers in Britain’, *The Times*, 21 Nov. 1957, p. 4.

51. “Patrol Aircraft Have Hydrogen Bombs”: Opposition Alarm at Use of British Bases’, *The Times*, 28 Nov. 1957, p. 10.

52. ‘U.S. Bombers in Britain: Joint Decision on Military Use’, *The Times*, 29 Nov. 1957, p. 14.

53. Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, p. 332; *Macmillan Diaries*, ed. Catterall, p. 74 (1 Dec. 1957).

54. See D.L. Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War* (Columbus, OH, 1999).

would tie the hands of President Eisenhower if he felt he needed to act quickly in a crisis.

These centrifugal tendencies were reflected in a number of statements made by John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State. Asked by reporters on 19 November whether the swiftness of a nuclear attack in the missile age would allow its victim to take any decisions, Dulles was quick to say that if it were a Pearl Harbor-style attack on NATO forces, the local commanders on the spot would have the power to retaliate immediately.⁵⁵ Although official US sources soon clarified that presidential authorisation for nuclear release would still be required, the comments were enough to trigger excited speculation over whether some pre-delegated powers had, in fact, been given to subordinate commanders. Meanwhile, Dulles had also made it plain, in response to press stories over whether new NATO procedures might involve a greater degree of consultation over nuclear matters, that no other country could place a veto on the US use of nuclear weapons. This was an assertion he repeated in talks held in Washington with the West German Foreign Minister.⁵⁶

During early December, Labour MPs fastened onto Dulles's public comments indicating that the United States would accept no veto on its decisions over nuclear use. Denis Healey, for example, asked the Foreign Secretary if they represented a 'unilateral rejection' of the previous Anglo-American agreements that existed in this area. Lloyd could merely reply that the government considered the United States bound by its previous undertakings that there should be a joint decision if US weapons were used from British bases. Bevan asked whether a hydrogen bomb would be branded with its country of origin if it were dropped from a base where consent for its use had been given, and if a hydrogen bomb were to be used against the Soviet Union from a non-British base, how would the Russians ever know the source? His question was simple and to the point: 'Would not it be desirable that the agreement should be extended to cover the use of a hydrogen bomb in any circumstances whatever—that there should be collective agreement before its use? Would not that be the only guarantee of any value at all?'. Lloyd evaded any direct answers, falling back on the response that there had been no changes to prior agreements with the United States.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, there was mounting pressure on the government to issue a White Paper documenting the agreements that existed in this area, and to seek further assurances from the Americans, particularly over the

55. See 'Nato Field Chiefs Can Strike Back, Dulles Declares', *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 1957, p. 1.

56. See 'Dulles, Brentano Meet in Prelude to NATO Parleys', *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 1957, pp. 1, 3; *FRUS, 1955-1957, IV: Western European Security and Integration* (Washington, DC, 1986), pp. 187-93 (Adenauer to Dulles, 19 Nov. 1957; memorandum of Dulles-von Brentano conversation, 23 Nov. 1957).

57. *Hansard*, 4 Dec. 1957, vol. 579, cols 371-3; 'America's Pledge Binding', *The Times*, 5 Dec. 1957, p. 3.

possible carriage by US aircraft of 'live' thermonuclear weapons over British territory.⁵⁸ On 12 December Macmillan had to field a succession of questions along similar lines, and his admission that the October 1951 agreement was an 'undertaking' that rested on no formal document, and which had been accepted as a 'mutually satisfactory arrangement', added to the disquiet on the opposition benches. Rebuffing calls for further negotiations to arrive at a formal agreement, Macmillan argued that experience showed it was better to rely on the earlier understandings as the outcome of the negotiating process could not always be predicted. In the same sitting, following the line that Bevan had pursued earlier, Barbara Castle asked the prime minister if he would try to extract a more general undertaking from the Eisenhower administration to consult over the use of US nuclear weapons from their bases in the continental United States, and not just those in the UK (in effect, the same request that Eden had unsuccessfully made in March 1953). Macmillan rejected these ideas, adding that, although he would not venture to suggest to the US administration any such 'infringement of sovereignty', he 'felt sure that by the closest collaboration and consultation between the Governments' a similar effect to that desired by Castle could be achieved.⁵⁹

Three days before he had engaged in these parliamentary exchanges concerning updating the 1951/52 understandings, on 9 December Macmillan had been shown the latest draft of the UK's nuclear retaliation procedures by the Cabinet Secretary. Brook advised Macmillan that discussions with the US authorities to co-ordinate procedures would be needed before any UK arrangements could be finalised, not least because of the moves taken in recent months to establish an intelligence alerts system. It was for this reason that Dean seemed the best official to engage in talks with the Americans over nuclear reprisal procedures. The draft procedures reviewed by Macmillan now carried the amendment that on receipt of intelligence alert the CAS would immediately order 'all possible unobtrusive measures' to bring the RAF to operational readiness, with the Cabinet to decide if any further preparatory steps should be taken, as laid down in the Government War Book. In the event of radar warning of an attack being received, the V-bomber force was to be prepared for immediate take-off, but the CAS would be granted the additional latitude to order the aircraft into the air if he felt there was a danger of their being attacked on the ground. Aircraft so ordered into the air would proceed on their routes but not go beyond a specified line of longitude unless further instructions were received; the CAS would inform the prime minister of this action and how long before the aircraft would reach their stop lines.⁶⁰

58. 'Disquiet on Nuclear Flights: Call for White Paper', *The Times*, 6 Dec. 1957, p. 10.

59. *Hansard*, 12 Dec. 1957, vol. 579, cols 1426–7, 1430–32; and see also 'Scope of Agreement: Action from U.S. Bases', *The Times*, 13 Dec. 1957, p. 4.

60. TNA, PREM 11/3260, Brook minute for Macmillan, 9 Dec. 1957, and attached paper, 'The Launching of the Strategic Nuclear Reprisal'; Bishop minute for Hunt, 11 Dec. 1957.

When consulted about the paper, Selwyn Lloyd registered his assent to talks with the Americans and passed no comment on the procedures themselves.⁶¹ The Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, Richard Powell, noted presciently that the increasing numbers of ballistic missiles that would soon be available to the Soviet Union could make the paper's one-hour radar warning time anticipated for a 'bolt from the blue' attack outdated in as little as two years. Powell was happy that the draft procedures gave the CAS discretion to launch the V-bomber force. However, he was less pleased that the Cabinet Office paper did not give any indication of what simultaneous action would be taken by the SAC forces in the UK; some decision would be required on when they too should be launched and on what authority. Similarly, it would also be necessary to discuss when and how the UK government's consent for the use of US bases in an emergency would be secured, Powell feeling that 'some measure of "automaticity" may have to be accepted'.⁶² Subsequent discussions brought out Dean's own thought that if the British side presented a detailed breakdown of their procedures to the Americans, as appeared to be envisaged, this might simply be regarded as a statement of British plans and not prompt the kind of discussion which would reveal US intentions (and as a result of this reasoning only a pared-down version of the UK procedures was later given to the Americans).⁶³ With these final reservations noted, the prime minister was now keen to see talks begin on joint procedures with the Americans, with Dean leading the British team.⁶⁴

IV

The parliamentary exchanges in December 1957 and recognition within Whitehall that new nuclear retaliation procedures were required should also be seen against the background of ongoing Anglo-American negotiations over the basing of US Thor IRBMs in the UK. British ministers had expressed concerns over the control arrangements for this force soon after an outline agreement had been reached between Macmillan and Eisenhower at their Bermuda meeting in March 1957 that sixty of these missiles would be stationed at bases in East Anglia. During subsequent talks with the Americans, US officials had envisaged that the initial missile units to arrive would be US-operated and -manned at US-run SAC bases in the UK. As such, they saw consent over their possible use as simply being covered by the same 'joint decision' principle as contained in the 1951/52 agreement. With Thor being

61. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Lloyd minute for Brook, FS/57/57, 23 Dec. 1957.

62. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Powell minute for Ward, RRP/2/58, 1 Jan. 1958, and attached paper.

63. See TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, 'The Strategic Nuclear Reprisal', 14 Feb. 1958.

64. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Hunt minute for Trend, 16 Jan. 1958.

equipped with US warheads and operated by US service personnel, the Americans had resisted British proposals that additional ‘dual key’ procedures be introduced to cover the physical release of the warheads at the bases themselves. This, in turn, had prompted British ministers to insist that the missiles should, in fact, be British-operated and situated at RAF-run sites. The Americans had eventually relented on their earlier plans for introducing as an initial step US-operated missiles and acceded to British wishes for a dual key arrangement to cover Thor’s launch procedures. There seems little doubt that the domestic political context had an important bearing on how the government handled the final stages of the Thor negotiations, with MPs showing active interest in the control arrangements for the force. Macmillan, for example, argued that for ‘domestic internal reasons’ he wanted the first Thor missiles to be British-operated to ‘give some semblance of UK control’.⁶⁵

The issue of the Thor negotiations, as well as the question of the American bases in the UK, came together when Macmillan saw Dulles in Paris for meetings of the North Atlantic Council in mid-December 1957. Referring to the ongoing talks about Thor, Dulles had said he hoped the formula for their use ‘might be based on joint decision by the two Governments who, in exercising their respective responsibilities, would be guided by the principle that an attack on one would be regarded as an attack on the other’. Seizing on this, Macmillan suggested that a similar formula could also be applied to US aircraft based in the UK, noting that he had been under ‘heavy pressure in Parliament on this, and it might be well to see whether the agreements and understandings reached some years ago needed to be brought up to date’.⁶⁶ This represented a crucial exchange, and helped prepare the ground for Dean’s subsequent talks.

However, following the NATO Council meeting, where it had been agreed that IRBMs should be based in other NATO countries in Western Europe and placed at the disposal of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the US authorities began to float the idea that the Thor missiles due to be deployed in the UK should also be treated in the same way, raising fears again that ‘control’ of the force might revert to the hands of a military commander, rather than be under the joint political control of the two governments. At a meeting of the Cabinet’s Defence Committee on 31 December, Macmillan referred to press reports that the Thor agreement would include ‘advanced consent’ providing for the automatic use of the missiles in certain circumstances,

65. See I. Clark and D. Angell, ‘Britain, the United States and the Control of Nuclear Weapons: The Diplomacy of the Thor Deployment, 1956–58’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, ii (1991), pp. 153–77; Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy*, pp. 69–76; J. Melissen, ‘The Thor Saga: Anglo-American Nuclear Relations, US IRBM Development and Deployment in Britain, 1955–1959’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xv (1992), pp. 172–207; Twigge and Scott, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 109–12.

66. TNA, PREM 11/1845, NA(57)(Del)3, record of a discussion held at the British Embassy, Paris, on 14 Dec. 1957; see also *FRUS, 1955–1957, IV*, p. 229 (memorandum of conversation, 14 Dec. 1957).

such as an attack on a NATO member. Macmillan, however, said he had always understood that there would be political consultation between the United States and the UK before any decision to use was taken, and Sandys confirmed that negotiations had been proceeding along these lines. The Committee noted that, ‘in practice’, there might be ‘little time’ for consultation to take place, but it was also considered ‘undesirable’ that nuclear forces should be launched ‘automatically’ without regard to the actual scale and significance of aggression involved.⁶⁷ A few days later, in a reflection of the domestic political sensitivities surrounding the issue, Macmillan made a party-political broadcast which referred to the Attlee government’s original agreement to host US bomber bases and described them as ‘part of our joint defences. Of course their bases cannot be used in war—warlike operations—except by agreement between our two Governments. We have a veto, and they have a veto’. Continuing that the latest US aircraft were now armed with hydrogen bombs, the prime minister said in categorical fashion: ‘None of these bombs could be or would be used except by deliberate military order given upon the instruction of both the British and the American Governments acting in agreement. We ourselves have an absolute veto on the dropping of these bombs from any plane based in this country—there is no doubt about this whatever’.⁶⁸

By the end of January 1958, the COS had also made clear their vigorous opposition to having Thor based in the UK unless its use was subject to the joint decision principle.⁶⁹ The final Thor Agreement, promulgated on 19 February 1958, stipulated that a decision to launch the missiles would be ‘a matter for joint decision by the two governments. Any such decision will be made in the light of the circumstances at the time and having regard to the undertaking the two governments have assumed in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty’.⁷⁰ In this manner the arrangements for Thor followed the language of the 1952 Churchill–Truman communiqué, with the addition of the dual key procedure, but there was no sense in which the missile could be considered an unambiguous element of ‘independent’ British deterrent power, and its potential link to SACEUR was left open for the future.

V

Meanwhile, in mid-January 1958, to prepare the *aide memoire* that Dean could use in his forthcoming talks with the Americans, a

67. TNA, CAB 131/18, D(57)14th mtg, item 3, 31 Dec. 1957.

68. See Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, pp. 462–3. The broadcast was delivered on 4 January 1958.

69. TNA, DEFE 4/103, COS(58)7th mtg, item 1, 21 Jan. 1958; and DEFE 5/81, COS(58)23, ‘American Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles’, 29 Jan. 1958.

70. *Supply of Ballistic Missiles by the United States to the United Kingdom*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1958, Cmnd 366, vol. xxx; see also Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence*, pp. 254–7.

Cabinet Office-led working group on nuclear retaliation procedures was formed, under John Hunt's chairmanship, and with representatives from the JIC, Foreign Office and Air Staff. By now it was thought advisable that the British approach should focus on the extent to which the US authorities would 'inevitably be involved in the steps leading up to a decision [on retaliation] by the United Kingdom Government'.⁷¹ The first goal, as the COS noted at the time, was to highlight to the Americans how enmeshed were the British procedures with the potential actions of US forces based in the UK, and that this was intended as a 'lever to proceed to more general discussions with the United States on the whole problem'.⁷²

The British *aide memoire* made the assumptions that the main Soviet threat would still come from manned bomber aircraft, that there would be advance intelligence warning of a Soviet intention to attack, and that any final decision to launch retaliatory forces would not be made until there was confirmation of an impending attack. The radar warning time of the latter event was now reduced to only forty minutes, while provision was made for the Air Ministry to alert the US commander of SAC units in the UK to the measures being taken to bring RAF units up to full operational readiness after receipt of intelligence or radar warnings. The *aide memoire* argued that, given the arrangements agreed for the sharing of intelligence on the likelihood of a Soviet attack, and the interrelationship between decisions to order UK and US units based in Britain into action, it was essential for Anglo-American procedures to be brought into line. The use of SAC units in the UK was in theory subject to joint decision in the event of an 'emergency', yet there was no understanding between the two governments of how this was to be defined. The purpose of the talks with the Americans would therefore be to ascertain whether UK ideas on the steps to be followed would dovetail with US procedures.⁷³

By now British officials were very much aware of the possibility that the Americans might see some ulterior motive in a British approach. Since it represented an attempt to draw the Americans into a discussion concerning the adoption of joint procedures, this might lead to the deeper political question of the circumstances under which a nuclear reprisal would be launched.⁷⁴ When he updated the prime minister in March 1958 on the latest position, Brook explained that the Cabinet Office's *aide memoire* now stressed the integration of UK and

71. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Wilson minute for Trend, 'Launching of Strategic Nuclear Reprisal', 3 Feb. 1958.

72. TNA, DEFE 4/103, confidential annex to COS(58)6th mtg, item 2, 17 Jan. 1958.

73. TNA, CAB 21/4757, annexes A and B to Wilson minute for Trend, 'Launching of Strategic Nuclear Reprisal', 3 Feb. 1958.

74. See TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, 'The Strategic Nuclear Reprisal', 14 Feb. 1958; Dean to Trend, 4 Mar. 1958, enclosing copy of Caccia to Dean, 24 Feb. 1958; Trend minute for Brook, 'The Strategic Nuclear Reprisal', 10 Mar. 1958.

US actions when ordering their respective forces to launch a nuclear reprisal. As well as suggesting that Macmillan send a personal letter to Eisenhower to initiate the talks, the Cabinet Secretary also made the point that, although the *aide memoire* concentrated on procedural matters:

because it is rather less a mere statement of our own intentions than the earlier memorandum and rather more an attempt to draw the United States into a positive discussion of the procedures which we and they should jointly adopt, there is perhaps the risk that it might create the impression in the minds of the Americans that we are seeking to use procedural questions as a means of ventilating the question of the political decision.⁷⁵

With time now beginning to press, as Macmillan was due to visit the United States in early June, when it was hoped by officials that any Anglo-American agreement reached on joint procedures could be given high-level approval, the prime minister despatched a carefully worded message to Eisenhower on 24 April 1958. ‘Recent developments have convinced us more than ever’, Macmillan’s message began, ‘that, if it ever became necessary to launch the Western nuclear retaliation to a Soviet attack, we could not risk any delay in ordering the strategic nuclear forces into action if they were to be successful’. While a British study of national procedures had been undertaken, Macmillan stressed that if there was a Soviet attack on the UK:

you would no doubt be involved with us from the beginning. Any Soviet attack on us would almost certainly coincide with a simultaneous attack either on United States bases elsewhere or, with increasing likelihood as time passes, on the United States mainland. In addition, there is the question of Strategic Air Command units here, and the American and British forces under operational control of SACEUR stationed in the United Kingdom.

He therefore felt sure Eisenhower would agree it was ‘essential’ that British and American procedures were in alignment, and suggested talks in Washington to make sure there was agreement on this ‘vital question’. While recognising that the issue of nuclear retaliation had wider implications for NATO as a whole, Macmillan thought an initial Anglo-American discussion would be appropriate before involving other members of the alliance.⁷⁶ The President’s reply arrived a few days

⁷⁵ TNA, PREM 11/3260, Brook minute for Macmillan, 25 Mar. 1958, and attached ‘Aide Memoire on Launching of Strategic Nuclear Reprisal’, and ‘Supplementary Notes for Discussions with United States Authorities’. As the material in TNA, CAB 21/4757, makes clear, Trend was the actual author of the minute.

⁷⁶ TNA, PREM 11/3260, Macmillan to Eisenhower, personal telegram T.148/58, 24 Apr. 1958. Macmillan’s letter had been drafted by Trend and was intended to remove any suggestion that the British were trying to push for a political discussion over the circumstances where nuclear weapons might be used; see TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, ‘The Strategic Nuclear Reprisal’, 10 Mar. 1958.

later, agreeing to a joint study of the issue and that the ‘whole matter be done on a most secret basis’.⁷⁷

Within the Ministry of Defence there remained some concerns that the form of the *aide memoire* could create the impression that the only occasion on which the government might decide to use its strategic nuclear forces was in response to a direct Soviet attack on the UK. Thus, another re-draft of the document was put forward by Powell, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, which now included the provision that if the need to use nuclear weapons arose from an attack by the Soviet Union or its allies with conventional or tactical nuclear weapons against the territory of NATO—and where the West chose to use its strategic nuclear forces first—then there would be time for a ‘normal procedure of consultation between governments’. The Ministry of Defence amendments also sought to widen the terms of the discussion away from the formula of a reprisal to an attack just on the UK, and to make it germane to an attack on the West in general.⁷⁸

Cabinet Office officials were, however, concerned that taking this line would again open up the political questions that so served to arouse American suspicions, as the scenario in the original approach—of a direct attack on the UK—was the one set of circumstances where there would be understandable British concerns over establishing joint procedures. Trend, for example, felt that the question which the Ministry of Defence re-draft would now really be putting (in implicit form) to the Americans would be:

By what means will you and we agree about the use to be made of the nuclear retaliatory forces based on this country (of which the United Kingdom component is under our sole control but the United States component can only be used by you with our agreement) if the Russians attack the interests of the West at any point in the world?

Of course, Trend acknowledged, this might be the more logical question to pose, particularly given the notion of ‘interdependence’ in the Anglo-American alliance that Macmillan had begun to propound after his Washington visit of October 1957, and the probability that any future thermonuclear war would be global in scope, with the precise subject of attack largely irrelevant. But now that Macmillan had approached Eisenhower on a narrower basis of a Soviet attack on the UK, there was the ‘risk that the Americans will suspect us of trying to establish a right to be a party to the ultimate political decision’, or that they would feel it was right to widen the discussion to bring in consultation with SACEUR, or other NATO members.⁷⁹

77. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Eisenhower to Macmillan, T.153/58, 30 Apr. 1958.

78. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Powell to Brook, RRP/381/58, 28 Apr. 1958, and attached annex A.

79. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, ‘Launching of the Nuclear Reprisal’, 5 May 1958.

Brook, nevertheless, thought the new emphasis of the document should be retained, despite the reservations of Trend, as well as senior Foreign Office officials. Dean therefore wrote to Sir Harold Caccia, the British Ambassador in Washington, on 10 May to explain the direction that thinking had travelled since earlier in the year. A wider agreement, reflecting the idea of interdependence, now seemed more appropriate and realistic. Were a thermonuclear war to occur, Dean noted:

Soviet attacks are unlikely to be directed exclusively (and may not be perhaps even primarily) against this country, and it would probably be necessary, if the nuclear deterrent is to play its full part, and if the arrangements we have entered into with the Americans for the location of their aircraft in this country are to have any meaning, for the nuclear retaliatory forces in this country to be able to attack the Soviet Union itself with their full power regardless of the direction of the Soviet Union's own attack.⁸⁰

Caccia's reply was reassuring—since receipt of Macmillan's letter to the president, Robert Murphy, the US Deputy Under-Secretary of State, had been nominated to lead the US side of the talks. Moreover, Caccia had already been able to see Murphy, establish a schedule for the discussions with Dean, and deliver the British *aide memoire*.⁸¹

When seeing US officials, Caccia had been frank in explaining the wider remit of the talks that were now envisaged compared with that contained in the prime minister's April message. Murphy had been positive in his response, suggesting anything too narrow would be 'unrealistic'. Moreover, from an initial look at the *aide memoire*, he felt it was on 'on the right lines'. Murphy did, however, add precisely the caveat that Trend had foreseen, in that he anticipated that the discussions with Dean would not venture into areas where no joint decision was required for nuclear use, offering the example 'if the United States were to employ U.S.S. Omaha [*sic*] to launch nuclear retaliation in the event of an attack in the Pacific'. One of Caccia's colleagues was quick to reassure the Americans that the proposal for talks on co-ordination was not an effort to extract any commitment to consult on the use of nuclear weapons anywhere in the world.⁸²

Murphy's important caveat reflected some of the internal US discussions that had taken place since receipt of Macmillan's April message to Eisenhower. Richard C. Breithut, the Deputy Special Assistant for Atomic Energy Affairs in the State Department, gave a comprehensive briefing to Murphy which highlighted previous British attempts to obtain a general American commitment to consult over a decision to use nuclear weapons anywhere, and the firm refusal of US

80. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Dean to Caccia, 10 May 1958.

81. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Caccia to Dean, 14 May 1958.

82. *Ibid.*; and State Department memorandum of conversation, 'British Proposal for Talks to Ensure U.K.–U.S. Agreement on Procedure for Reaching Decision to Launch Nuclear Retaliation', 14 May 1958, available via the *Digital National Security Archive* at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/digital-national-security-archive> (accessed 12 June 2021) [hereafter DNSA].

officials to give any such assurance (such as Eden had experienced in March 1953). Breithut linked the prime minister's approach to recent parliamentary questions, and the increasing British sense of military threat from the Soviet Union as warning time for an attack diminished. 'There is undoubtedly apprehension', he noted, 'over possible consequences to Britain of independent action by the United States—either because we might not come to its defense in time or because we might involve it in action initiated by ourselves'. As they developed their own capability, the British would also, he added, want to ensure co-ordination of nuclear planning, and learn more about US command arrangements. 'It seems clear', Breithut advised, 'that we can accept no limitation upon United States freedom of action'. Any agreement to consult would need to be framed with the usual and important caveat if 'time and circumstances permit this'. At the same time, he could see the case for more effective nuclear co-ordination, especially as plans had to be made 'for possibly almost instantaneous decision'.⁸³

Murphy's chief point of contact in the Defense Department for the purpose of agreeing and co-ordinating a response to the British initiative was Mansfield D. Sprague, the Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs. Sprague supplied Murphy with a set of suggested guidelines for the talks which noted the US interest in reaching a concerted position with the British, but once again stressed that any agreement should 'in no way restrict or prejudice' the US freedom to take a unilateral decision to use its nuclear forces located outside Britain. The Defense Department wanted to exclude any consideration of the US tactical nuclear forces allocated to SACEUR based in the UK, and to avoid tripartite discussions with the Canadians as this could complicate the bilateral discussions with Ottawa in which the Americans were already engaged. The search for a procedural agreement with the British over reaching a joint decision regarding the launch of US strategic nuclear retaliatory forces in the UK should not be 'misinterpreted and used', the document warned, 'to achieve the basis for the development of any combined machinery for decision making'.⁸⁴ A meeting held on 29 May between State, Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials, including Murphy and Sprague, finalised the US position, where the emphasis once again was on not allowing the agenda of the forthcoming talks with Dean to drift into wider areas.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Dean prepared himself for his trip to Washington by meeting Trend, along with several Ministry of Defence officials, on 20

83. DNSA, Breithut memorandum for Murphy, 8 May 1958; Breithut memorandum for Murphy, 13 May 1958 (accessed 12 June 2021).

84. See DNSA, Sprague to Murphy, 28 May 1958, and attached memorandum (accessed 12 June 2021).

85. DNSA, memorandum for the files, 'Meeting on British Proposal for Discussions of Procedures for Reaching Decision to Launch Nuclear Retaliation', 29 May 1958 (accessed 12 June 2021).

May. Here it was agreed that the object of the forthcoming discussions would be to ascertain ‘accurate and detailed information about the drill which the Americans operate as regards their own nuclear forces’, and the understanding that the UK and US approaches should be made to dovetail by a ‘full and frank exchange’ of information between Bomber Command and SAC forces based in the UK. Murphy’s caveat on what the talks should not cover was recognised, but it was nevertheless felt that if the Americans did launch a unilateral nuclear attack in the Pacific, ‘this country would be in very grave danger and the Government of the day would clearly need to consider, as a matter of extreme urgency, the action which they should take’. There seemed no way for Dean to address the matter directly, and Macmillan would probably have to be briefed on the American reservation before his own visit to Washington.⁸⁶

Trend was certainly pleased, as he reported to the Cabinet Secretary, that the Americans appeared to have ‘swallowed our *aide memoire* (even in its expanded form) without any difficulty’. But he remained troubled by the deeper political issues that lay at ‘the sensitive root’ of the impending talks, and that Dean would only be able to explore such aspects ‘very gently, no farther and no faster than his American colleagues are willing to go’. To Trend, it was an unavoidable conclusion that settling on joint arrangements with the Americans for forces located in the UK would not be enough:

if we are to obtain the maximum protection from nuclear retaliation, we must be physically ready—and politically ready as well—to launch the forces in this country as soon as either the Americans or the Russians have dropped a nuclear bomb anywhere in the world—even if the Americans have done so in circumstances where, in their opinion, no joint decision is required (e.g. in the Pacific).

The question remained whether such a difficult subject might be raised by the prime minister when he saw Eisenhower in Washington.⁸⁷ With Dean due to arrive in the US capital at the start of June, he only just had time to consult the Ministry of Defence on Trend’s basic point. Ministry of Defence officials were clear that there would be no possibility of the UK having any kind of real voice in a US decision to use nuclear weapons outside of Britain. Nevertheless, they did at least think that some effort should be made to secure an understanding that the UK should be informed of any intention to do so, in order that Bomber Command could be brought to an appropriate state of readiness. Over nuclear weapons based in the UK which were assigned to NATO, and so targeted by SACEUR, it was felt desirable to reach a private agreement that the use of such weapons by a British or US

86. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend to Dean, 20 May 1958.

87. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, ‘Launching of the Nuclear Reprisal’, 20 May 1958.

officer in their role as a NATO commander should require a joint decision by the US and UK governments, rather than be remitted to a potentially cumbersome process of joint decision of all members of the NATO Council.⁸⁸ Dean would have to see how far he could get with these two additional issues while he was in Washington.⁸⁹

In the event, the Anglo-American discussions in Washington on procedure, which began on 3 June, went more smoothly than British officials might have expected. The American response to the British *aide memoire*, outlined in a memorandum presented to Embassy officials the day before the opening of the talks, was seen as very satisfactory. Apart from clarifying that the requirement for joint decision applied to the use of 'bases' in the UK, rather than US forces (to cover the contingency of the US redeploying its forces to different theatres from the UK in the event of an emergency elsewhere), the chief American concern, as Trend had predicted, was that the current talks be limited to use of US bases in the UK and not stray into matters relating to US nuclear forces located elsewhere. This limitation was accepted by Dean, although in private conversation with Murphy the British delegates made the point that 'an independent use by either side of their own nuclear forces without notification of the decision to use them to the other would involve very grave operational consequences'. Whether such a notification should be given, the British side said, would be a political question, and as such might best be remitted to the upcoming meeting between the president and prime minister. The Americans were also averse to including the US bombers with a tactical nuclear capability, based in the UK and assigned to NATO, in the talks; though agreeing their use would also be subject to a joint decision, they wanted to consult SACEUR on his own specific procedures, for which a separate set of talks would be required. Finally, US officials also wanted to see mention of the Thor missiles in any final accord, even though their use was covered by the recent Anglo-American agreement of February 1958.⁹⁰

By the second day of the talks a provisional agreement had been reached between the US and British representatives on a draft text which could be presented to Macmillan and Eisenhower. The main issue in the drafting process as far as the British side was concerned was to ensure that the text contained nothing that might imply any dilution of the UK's unilateral right to use its own strategic nuclear forces, while at the same time maintaining the principle of joint decision for US forces based in Britain.⁹¹ On this matter, the Americans,

88. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Way to Dean, 30 May 1958.

89. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Trend minute for Brook, 'Launching of the Nuclear Reprisal', 2 June 1958.

90. TNA, PREM 11/3260, Washington telegram No. 1373 to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 3 June 1958. For the official US position on the eve of the talks, see DNSA, State Department memorandum, 'Aide Memoire: Launching of Nuclear Retaliation,' 2 June 1958.

91. See, for example, TNA, CAB 21/4757, Wilson to Bishop, 'Launching of the Nuclear Reprisal', 5 June 1958, covering draft telegram to Washington for Dean. The Cabinet Office view

Dean reported, had ‘clearly understood’ the UK’s right of independent action. Nevertheless, he was forced to acknowledge that if this right was exercised, the UK would still be bound to inform the US authorities of British intentions under the procedures outlined in the draft agreement; this had been impossible to avoid, especially if the Americans were also to concede on the principle of prior notification when it came to use of their forces outside the UK.⁹² Dean recalled later that he had ‘always had doubts myself about the wisdom of raising the independent use of the nuclear retaliation but I was under specific orders from the Chiefs of Staff and Duncan Sandys to do so’.⁹³

To set the record straight on this key point, the British delegates had composed a separate draft minute which noted that ‘any independent use by one party would have at least grave operational implications for the other, for example, by necessitating the adoption of the maximum state of readiness for the forces not so used’. The minute, therefore, made clear that while the decision to use nuclear retaliatory forces in an independent role was a national one, it was agreed that if such a decision was taken then each government should notify the other. It was anticipated that the minute might be used by the prime minister and president as the basis for another shared understanding when they met.⁹⁴

Prior notification of an intention to use nuclear weapons had the potential to become, as Cabinet Office officials termed it, another ‘delicate political issue’. If the United States were to launch an attack against the Soviet Union from its bases outside the UK, Dean was reminded from London, Soviet retaliation against US bases in the UK could be expected. However, the presence of those bases was built on the shared agreement of 1950 that they were necessary ‘in the interests of common defence’. In a scenario where the British government was alerted to an intention by the Americans to launch such an attack it could—in theory, and given sufficient advance notice—decide that the US bases were no longer desirable and require the US forces to leave in order to reduce the risk of an attack on the UK. This was a point it was thought advisable not to convey to the Americans in the current talks, but it did inform British consideration of the value of having such advance notification of US intentions.⁹⁵

was that the ‘essential point we must secure is that nothing in the draft report or any other document can possibly be read as restricting our use of the RAF medium bomber force or any possible future British strategic nuclear weapon’.

92. TNA, PREM 11/3260, Washington telegram No. 1389 to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 4 June 1958.

93. TNA, FO 371/135636, ZP23/46G, Dean to Hoyer Millar, 10 June 1958.

94. TNA, PREM 11/3260, Washington telegram No. 1391 to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 4 June 1958.

95. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Foreign Office telegram No. 3393 to Washington for Dean, 6 June 1958.

As it transpired, when senior ministers discussed what further instructions to give to Dean in Washington after the productive first two rounds of talks, they decided to drop the idea of reaching agreement over prior notification of the intention to use nuclear forces not covered by the joint decision principle. Macmillan, Dean was informed, wanted more time to consider the matter, though he was said to be even thinking of ‘something better than mere notification’. In any event, after he arrived in Washington, Macmillan discussed the matter with Dean, and it would seem he did not choose to broach the subject with Eisenhower.⁹⁶

One further issue that caused some trouble in drafting an agreement concerned the need, as far as the Americans were concerned, to make some reference in the British procedures to the fact that US consent would need to be obtained for the use of US nuclear warheads on both the Thor missiles which were due for deployment in the UK and those allocated to British bomber aircraft under the Project E arrangements.⁹⁷ British Air Ministry officials were uncomfortably aware that weapons planned for the RAF V-bomber force under Project E would be retained under formal US custody at RAF airfields, and would need to be released by the US authorities for UK use in an emergency situation. The first aircraft adapted to carry US weapons were four squadrons of Canberras assigned to the NATO tactical nuclear role and deployed at RAF bases in West Germany during 1958, but, as noted above, up to half of the front-line V-bomber force was also scheduled to be converted as part of this programme (with seventy-two Mark 5 US nuclear weapons to be housed in special storage at three of the main V-bomber bases—Waddington, Honington and Coningsby).⁹⁸ Reliance on Project E weapons was difficult to reconcile with complete British nuclear independence—an issue the Cabinet Office-composed procedures for national nuclear retaliation did little to acknowledge. Indeed, British officials had been careful to avoid any reference to the issue of Project E in their initial drafting of the text on Anglo-American procedures. However, after exposure to US views they recognised there would have to be some efforts made to cover this delicate subject in the final document.

On 6 June 1958, agreement was reached between Dean and Murphy on the texts for both a document describing what they had accomplished (styled in the form of a report to the president and prime minister) and two detailed annexes covering respective UK and US procedures.

96. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Foreign Office telegram No. 3394 to Washington for Dean, 6 June 1958.

97. See TNA, PREM 11/3260, Washington telegram No. 1389 to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 4 June 1958.

98. See Moore, *Nuclear Illusion*, pp. 98–9, 114; Bronk, ‘Britain’s “Independent” V-Bomber Force’, pp. 979–83, 985; TNA, AIR 2/13789, ‘Requirements for Nuclear Weapons’, AC(59)47, note by DCAS, 29 May 1959.

British officials were generally pleased with the outcome; Dean reported that the atmosphere at the talks had been ‘extremely good’ and that the Americans had ‘come a very long way towards meeting our requirements’.⁹⁹ There was mention in paragraph 2 of the document of the ‘basic understanding’ that in an emergency a joint decision would be needed by the two governments ‘in light of the circumstances at the time’ regarding the use of bases in the UK by US forces; that there was a similar provision made in the Thor agreement of February 1958; and that ‘a decision by both parties’ was required to ‘commit to the attack’ the aircraft of the RAF’s V-bomber force which were ‘carrying nuclear [Project E] weapons of United States origin’. After noting in paragraph 4 that an outline of UK and US procedures for ordering their nuclear forces into action was supplied in two annexes to the report, and that they were ‘mutually understood and mutually consistent’, paragraph 5 of the document emphasised that the procedures in the annexes related only to the itemised categories of forces and did not cover US forces located outside the UK, or other UK nuclear forces. The categories of forces covered by the agreement was once again repeated in paragraph 6 (adding the detail that the US forces were ‘units of the United States Strategic Air Command located in the United Kingdom’), and also made the point that US tactical bomber units located at UK bases and committed to SACEUR were also covered by the understanding over the need for a joint decision and that a follow-up review would attempt to bring them under the terms of the procedural arrangements contained in the annexes. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the document was the observation in paragraph 4 that the joint decision ‘would be taken by the President and the Prime Minister, who would speak personally with each other’.¹⁰⁰

The annex covering British procedures specified the national actions to be taken under the two types of warning that would be available, strategic and tactical. If only a tactical warning had been issued, most probably from a radar alert, then it was confirmed that the CAS would order the V-bomber force to immediate readiness for take-off, and also had discretion to send the force into the air under positive control if the aircraft were deemed to be in danger of destruction on the ground. The

99. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Washington telegram No. 1406 to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 6 June 1958; PREM 11/3260, Hooper minute for Lloyd, ‘Launching of the Nuclear Reprisal’, 5 June 1958.

100. TNA, CAB 21/4757 and in PREM 11/3260, report to the President and the Prime Minister, ‘Procedures for the Committing to the Attack of Nuclear Retaliatory Forces in the United Kingdom’, 7 June 1958. US tactical bomber forces based in the UK and committed to SACEUR, as well as UK nuclear forces earmarked to use US nuclear weapons under Project E arrangements and also committed to SACEUR’s plans, were brought into the scope of the Murphy–Dean Agreement via an addendum agreed between the two governments in May 1959; see TNA, PREM 11/3260, Brook minute for Macmillan, ‘Launching of Nuclear Retaliation’, 16 Mar. 1959; Caccia to Murphy, 11 May 1959, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-9.pdf> (accessed 26 July 2024).

SAC Commander in the UK, as well as SACEUR, would be informed of the steps being taken. As was the case with a strategic warning, the prime minister and president would consult together regarding a joint decision committing UK-based nuclear forces to the attack. A separate paragraph covered the need for consultation between the prime minister and president over the use by the UK of warheads of American origin, mentioning both the V-bomber force and the UK's contingent of Thor missiles in this context.¹⁰¹

When he forwarded the final texts to Macmillan on 8 June, Dean noted that he had stressed to the Americans the secrecy that should surround the documents, and that neither government should discuss them openly without the consent of the other.¹⁰² The following day, Macmillan and Eisenhower met and put their stamp of approval on the Murphy–Dean Agreement, both men affirming that its existence should be kept ‘a close secret and that no reference would be made to it by either party without the agreement of the other’.¹⁰³ A day after the Agreement was signed, Dean wrote to the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Derick Hoyer Millar, reflecting that it was ‘useful to have got the thing in the bag, even though I don’t expect it will ever be used in practice’.¹⁰⁴

The Macmillan–Eisenhower meeting on 9 June 1958 witnessed the convergence of several different important threads of the deepening bilateral relationship. In the same session as the Murphy–Dean Agreement was initialled, the president and prime minister approved another report assembled by Dean and Allen Dulles, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, on progress made with the rapid exchanges of alerts intelligence, including procedures to be followed, methods of communication and a common indicator list. It was expected that a final agreement, to include the Canadians, could be reached and a full-scale test of the intelligence sharing system could be staged in the near future.¹⁰⁵ US officials also reviewed the steps that had been taken with Congress to amend US atomic energy legislation allowing for a bilateral nuclear agreement to be concluded with the UK; much work on the latter had already been completed since technical joint working groups had met in December 1957, and a very full exchange of nuclear knowledge and information between the two sides was by now

101. TNA, CAB 21/4757 and in PREM 11/3260, annexes A and B to report to the President and the Prime Minister, ‘Procedures for the Committing to the Attack of Nuclear Retaliatory Forces in the United Kingdom’, 7 June 1958.

102. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Dean, ‘Note for the Prime Minister: Procedure for Launching Nuclear Retaliation’, 8 June 1958.

103. TNA, CAB 21/4757, Washington telegram No. 296 saving to Foreign Office for Hooper from Dean, 10 June 1958.

104. TNA, FO 371/135636, ZP23/46G, Dean to Hoyer Millar, 10 June 1958.

105. TNA, PREM 11/2276, memorandum by Dean and Dulles, ‘Tripartite Intelligence Alerts’, 4 June 1958, contained in Washington telegram No. 300 saving to Foreign Office, 10 June 1958.

imminent.¹⁰⁶ The Murphy–Dean Agreement had an additional time-liness since it dovetailed with the talks that were taking place between representatives of RAF Bomber Command and SAC over joint nuclear target planning, where agreement over a combined plan had been reached on 4 June 1958. The fully combined plan, which was due to come into effect from 1 October 1958, involved a Bomber Command contribution of ninety-two aircraft (twenty-eight of which were expected to be carrying US weapons), increasing to 108 aircraft by June 1959.¹⁰⁷

VI

The very existence of the Murphy–Dean Agreement was a tangible sign that the bilateral Anglo-American nuclear relationship had a deeper quality than most others within the North Atlantic alliance during a period when the issue of equality of treatment between its members was becoming an increasingly important source of tension. When Macmillan had met Eisenhower in Washington in the wake of the Sputnik shock in October 1957, it had been agreed that several Anglo-American working groups would be established across different areas of Cold War policy to embed the principle of co-ordination and consultation. It was also agreed that the entire working group arrangement—representing an attempt to ‘institutionalise’ co-operation—was to remain unobtrusive and secret for fear of offending the sensibilities of other NATO members who would resent their exclusion from the Anglo-American core (and in fact references to the existence of the bilateral working groups were initially omitted from US and British documents from the period when they began to be declassified in the late 1980s and early 1990s). At the end of May 1958, moreover, de Gaulle had returned to power in France, determined to challenge what he saw as an Anglo-American hegemony that dominated the institutions of NATO, and in September he presented his *directoire* memorandum which pushed for a system of tripartite consultation at the centre of the alliance, with France now involved in crucial decisions over whether and how nuclear weapons would be used.¹⁰⁸

In this context, and aside from the fact that the Murphy–Dean Agreement contained sensitive details concerning some of the operational and decision-making steps involved in nuclear release on both

106. See TNA, FO 371/135636, record of first meeting held in the White House on Monday 9 June 1958 at 3 p.m., item 6.

107. See Wynn, *RAF Nuclear Deterrent Forces*, pp. 270–75; TNA, AIR 8/2201, COS(58)148, ‘Coordination of Anglo/American Nuclear Strike Plans’, 5 June 1958.

108. On this subject, see M. Jones, ‘Anglo-American Relations after Suez, the Rise and Decline of the Working Group Experiment, and the French Challenge to NATO, 1957–59’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, xiv (2003), pp. 49–79; and in general, J. Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* (London, 2018), pp. 498–501.

sides of the Atlantic, it is understandable that both the British and US governments placed a premium on shrouding the Agreement in secrecy as it once more underscored the closeness of Anglo-American consultative arrangements in the nuclear realm. Several other members of NATO played host to US air bases and nuclear weapons—not least the Federal Republic of Germany—and the Eisenhower administration would not have wanted the same consultative arrangements extended to its other non-nuclear alliance partners.

It is also apparent that giving practical effect to the Agreement's stipulation that there should be some form of direct and personal consultation between prime minister and president, under conditions of potential nuclear attack, in order to reach the crucial 'joint decision' was not quickly achieved. As late as July 1959, for example, Murphy was writing to Jock Whitney, the US ambassador in London, in order to explain that in March the British authorities had been told that there existed a telephone link between the White House and the US Air Force command post at South Ruislip near London, and it had been suggested that a line from South Ruislip might be connected to Downing Street to allow for direct communication in an emergency between prime minister and president. The British had given a 'tentatively favourable' response to this proposal, Murphy reported, and technical talks were beginning on installing the necessary equipment. There was obvious concern, however, that such a line would be non-secure, but the right equipment for secure speech had not yet been developed.¹⁰⁹ It therefore seems clear that, over a year after its conclusion, there was still no effective way to implement the Agreement's most important point concerning reaching a joint decision between president and prime minister under emergency conditions, and this after the Western alliance had traversed the tense Berlin crisis with the Soviet Union during the winter of 1958/9.¹¹⁰

A further striking feature of the Agreement was its explicit treatment of the UK's need for US permission to employ Project E weapons allocated to the RAF. When Cabinet Office officials first devised the British procedures for authorisation of nuclear retaliation by the V-bomber force in the autumn of 1957, they seemed to possess no appreciation that formal US concurrence (at a presidential level) would be required before these US-supplied weapons could be legally transferred and so employed by the RAF in any unilateral national strike plan. The use of Project E weapons made sense for Anglo-American combined strike planning purposes, where the aims and outlook of the US and British governments were shared, but in the situation where a purely

109. DNSA, Murphy to Whitney, 19 July 1959.

110. It is also worth noting that the Air Ministry (and the CAS) had to ask the Ministry of Defence for a copy of the Murphy–Dean Agreement and was not furnished by the Cabinet Office with a full record of the Macmillan–Eisenhower talks; see TNA, AIR 8/2213, R.C. Kent to F.W. Mottershead, CAS 1680, 27 June 1958.

national decision for nuclear retaliation was involved this would have created numerous practical problems if formal authorisation for nuclear release had ever been required, as it implied an American veto existed. All this had obvious implications for operational independence as Bomber Command tried to put together a national plan under the first target policy directive it received from the COS in October 1957.¹¹¹

For all the anxieties expressed by officials that any Anglo-American consultation procedures should not in any way inhibit the operation of the V-bomber force in a national role, British reliance on substantial numbers of Project E weapons, at least until British production of Yellow Sun thermonuclear bombs began to allow their replacement in the early 1960s, meant that the Murphy–Dean Agreement might have involved, in effect, a formal requirement for the prime minister to reach a joint decision with the US president in the (admittedly highly unlikely) contingency of an avowedly ‘independent’ nuclear strike by the UK.¹¹² How far this was appreciated at senior levels of the Cabinet Office, and even in Downing Street, is not obvious from the documentary record, and it is noticeable that the Air Ministry was keen to limit knowledge of the whole Project E programme, and to press for the substitution of UK weapons for US weapons (except for those aircraft assigned to SACEUR for targeting) as soon as the former became available.¹¹³ During 1959, indeed, the Air Ministry began to grapple with the awkward problem that its plans to disperse a portion of the V-bomber force to a number of different airfields in the period of tension before the outbreak of war could not be accomplished for those aircraft designated to carry US weapons without American concurrence. Partly as a result, in July 1960, the Air Council took the decision to phase out the use of the Project E weapons for the UK’s strategic nuclear force, but it was not until the spring of 1962 that UK-produced thermonuclear weapons would be available in sufficient numbers for this to happen.¹¹⁴

VII

Examining the origins, content and implications of the Murphy–Dean Agreement exposes some of the sharp limitations and political

111. TNA, AIR 8/2201, COS(57)224, ‘Strategic Target Policy for Bomber Command’, 16 Oct. 1957.

112. For Yellow Sun production, see Moore, *Nuclear Illusion*, pp. 104–5, 210.

113. For evidence that the Air Ministry was not keen to ventilate the issue of Project E and its relationship to national nuclear strike planning in front of the COS, see TNA, AIR 2/13789, Hudleston minute for AUS(A), 8 Apr. 1958; AIR 8/2201, R.F. Butler minute for ACAS (Ops), CAS 1039, ‘Strategic Target Policy for Bomber Command’, 13 May 1958. Macmillan was informed about the current state of Project E in June 1960, but, as Justin Bronk has noted, his initial inquiry indicates he had little prior knowledge of progress with this programme; see Bronk, ‘Britain’s “Independent” V-Bomber Force’, pp. 991–2.

114. See Wynn, *RAF Nuclear Deterrent Forces*, p. 266; and see TNA, AIR 2/13789, Air Council minutes, 21(59), 22 Oct. 1959.

constraints surrounding the operational independence of the UK's V-bomber force during its initial years. While in theory a 'national' unilateral decision to launch it could have been made, in practice the procedures outlined in the Agreement made very clear that any actions by the UK's V-bomber force would be integrated with the actions which the US authorities would take regarding their own SAC forces in Britain. The key assumption found in the British documents was that it was almost inconceivable that a Soviet attack would be made against the UK alone, meaning that the contingency of separate national retaliation would simply never arise. This point was also underlined with the steps taken to assemble a combined Anglo-American nuclear strike plan in 1957–58.¹¹⁵

In June 1958, just a few days before he signed the Murphy–Dean Agreement, Macmillan was telling some of his officials that specifying precise numbers of British warheads in relation to a national target plan was a mistaken approach. Instead:

[w]hat was important was that our contribution to the deterrent must be entirely under our own control. We must have unfettered right over our deterrent weapons. It was this which would ensure our full rights as a voting member of the Nuclear Club.¹¹⁶

However, as noted above, the Air Ministry's plan that up to half of the V-bomber force should be equipped with Project E weapons also meant that formal permission for their use would have to be sought from the Americans to allow their transfer from US-maintained secure storage to the RAF. This situation would obtain until 1962, when they were finally replaced by UK-manufactured Yellow Sun bombs. This basic fact, when put beside the terms of the Murphy–Dean Agreement, and the reality of Anglo-American joint nuclear planning, shows that, for several years, behind Macmillan's façade of 'national control' was a strategic nuclear force whose employment would be tied into consultative processes involving the Americans.

There was a wider strategic significance to this point. By the time the 1957 Defence White Paper was produced, the rationale for why the UK needed to possess its own strategic nuclear forces had begun to stress the need to insure against the potential reluctance of the United States, when faced with the threat of retaliation on its own cities from the Soviet Union, to use its own strategic nuclear forces to defend Western Europe.¹¹⁷ Implicit in this argument was that the UK had to be capable of independent and unilateral nuclear action. Commentators were beginning to draw attention to the point that Britain's independent nuclear forces could in theory act as a trigger, or catalyst, in the event of

115. See TNA, AIR 20/11338, Boyle comments in confidential annex to COS(57)72nd mtg, item 5, 23 Sept. 1957.

116. TNA, PREM 11/2275, Bishop note, 5 June 1958, as quoted in Jones, *Official History*, p. 113.

117. A point made in Pierre, *Nuclear Politics*, p. 100.

a conflict with the Soviet Union. While not being capable of crippling the Soviet Union on their own, if used first they might still be able to draw the United States into launching its own strategic nuclear forces, especially when it was appreciated in Washington that the Soviet Union would not be able to distinguish between an attack delivered by the UK alone, or one which involved combined American and British nuclear forces, and so could be expected to react by launching its own weapons against the US homeland.¹¹⁸ This additional layer of uncertainty and risk for a Soviet leadership contemplating an attack on the West was supposed to reinforce deterrence.

However, the Murphy–Dean Agreement helps to expose any false assumptions during the post-Suez V-bomber era concerning the UK's ability to launch such a 'catalytic' nuclear response, when Anglo-American nuclear release procedures were so integrated, and when national nuclear planning was explicitly retaliatory in nature. The route to the Murphy–Dean Agreement had begun with the government's need in 1957 to devise national procedures which would allow for the rapid issuing of instructions to launch the recently created V-bomber force at its Soviet targets, and this in turn intersected with a process that led to the production by the COS of the first national target policy for Bomber Command in October 1957. This latter document, which presented scenarios for co-ordinated action with the United States and for a unilateral UK nuclear strike (the latter directed against Soviet cities alone), assumed throughout that the West would not initiate nuclear war, but would be retaliating in the face of Soviet aggression where it was calculated that the Soviet leadership was very likely to use both nuclear and conventional weapons from the outset of war. In the unlikely event that the Soviet Union decided to launch a war with conventional weapons only, the policy did mention it was 'conceivable' that the West might take the nuclear initiative. However, in this case it called for an Allied nuclear offensive aimed at destroying the Soviet Union's ability to launch nuclear attacks against the West by targeting airfields, aircraft and missile launching sites—something far beyond the resources of Bomber Command acting independently.¹¹⁹ There was therefore no question of the UK itself initiating a nuclear attack in the official target policy adopted in late 1957, and every expectation that its nuclear effort would be combined with that of the United States.

The Murphy–Dean Agreement reinforces such conclusions. Compiling the UK's own nuclear release procedures led to the realisation from British officials that any use of Britain's strategic nuclear forces would inevitably be intertwined with the alert and employment of US SAC aircraft operating from UK bases. Growing parliamentary

¹¹⁸ See Pierre, *Nuclear Politics*, pp. 171, 175; and also L. Freedman, *Britain and Nuclear Weapons* (London, 1980), p. 13.

¹¹⁹ TNA, AIR 8/2201, 'Strategic Target Policy for Bomber Command', COS(57)224, 16 Oct. 1957.

and public pressure over the position of US nuclear forces in Britain by the end of 1957, moreover, led ministers and officials to understand that they would have to open negotiations with the Eisenhower administration to properly codify the loose 'joint decision' formula reached in 1951. The Agreement that finally emerged in June 1958 was a reflection of the fact that even if a British government were to decide on independent nuclear action, co-ordination and agreement with the US authorities would in practical terms be indispensable. This would remain the case for several years after the agreement was signed, and until UK dependence on US weapons for the V-bomber force was reduced and more UK-manufactured weapons became available for Bomber Command.

In the post-Suez international environment, Britain's relative power position was much diminished. As if to compensate, British governments trumpeted the UK's nuclear independence in successive defence white papers and claimed that this bought influence in Washington. However, such were the pressures on defence spending at this time that ministers and officials endeavoured to gain technical and material assistance from the United States in the nuclear warhead area under the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, so that the costs of the UK's nuclear programme could be contained. And in 1960 the indigenous Blue Streak IRBM was abandoned in favour of a purchase of the American Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile, leading to an outcry from Opposition MPs and the press that Britain had given up the cause of remaining an independent nuclear power.¹²⁰

The Murphy–Dean Agreement, however, shows that beyond the technical realm of the Mutual Defence Agreement and the hardware of nuclear delivery systems, procedures for joint operational nuclear planning and co-ordination were already, long before Blue Streak cancellation, serving to undermine a purist notion of nuclear independence. Ultimately, the Agreement offered British ministers the (private) reassurance that US nuclear forces based in the UK would not be ordered into action without some high-level consultation. The Americans felt the need to synchronise their own nuclear procedures for their forces based in the UK with their British equivalents, but they also made it clear in the negotiations that led to the Agreement that they would not feel obliged to consult with the UK in all circumstances if US nuclear forces outside Britain were ever employed. In November 1958, when the Cabinet's Defence Committee discussed the UK's future nuclear weapons policy (and even whether to abandon the nuclear deterrent completely), Sandys was still arguing that the United States should not be left as the only nuclear power in the West and that

120. See Pierre, *Nuclear Politics*, pp. 197–8, and Jones, *Official History*, p. 217.

‘he could envisage circumstances in which the threat that we would use our nuclear weapons independently of the United States would be the only method of preserving peace’.¹²¹ What the Murphy–Dean Agreement helps to show us, above all, is that this threat was built on a false prospectus.

*London School of Economics
and Political Science, UK*

MATTHEW JONES

121. TNA, CAB 131/19, D(58)24th mtg, item 1, 5 Nov. 1958.