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CABINET

USE OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND FOR
UNITED STATES NUCLEAR TESTS

Memorandum by the Prime Minister

During the meeting which the Foreign Secretary and I had with President Kennedy and Mr. Rusk in Bermuda on 21st and 22nd December we discussed at length the possibility of the United States resuming nuclear tests in the atmosphere. We were much assisted in our discussions by Sir William Penney, Deputy Chairman of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, and Dr. Seaborg, Chairman of the United States Atomic Energy Commission.

2. Assessment of the recent series of Soviet tests

Sir William Penney and Dr. Seaborg explained that the recent series of Soviet tests had undoubtedly been of military significance. The Soviet Union has not drawn ahead of the West in nuclear knowledge but the lead which the West previously possessed has disappeared. The Russians may now know more than the West about 100 megaton weapons and their effects, although the West are still better informed about light-weight weapons with an explosive power of about one megaton. If both sides now refrained from conducting further tests the balance of the deterrent could be held. The indications are, however, that some of the Soviet tests were directed towards the development of anti-missile systems. If therefore the Russians, after a further period of preparation, which might take as long as two years, were to conduct a further series of tests and the West had meanwhile refrained from further testing, the Soviet Union might then be at a significant advantage in the anti-missile field.

3. Possibilities of an anti-missile defence

Both the British and the American scientists agree that the difficulties of developing an effective anti-missile defence are enormous. To be really effective such a system would have to be able to destroy over 90 per cent of any attacking missiles. This would be extremely difficult in any case, but the task of the defenders could be made even harder if attacking missiles had decoys in them. In addition it is possible that very large explosions at high altitudes might further complicate the defence by interrupting radar and radio systems. Finally, such weapons, exploded perhaps as far as 25 miles from the earth, would be much harder to destroy by anti-missile attack than would weapons set to

explode at lower altitudes. But nuclear weapons in the 80-100 megaton range could cause great destruction by their heat and fire-raising effects even though they were exploded at these high altitudes. Our experts, therefore, concluded that the chances of effective anti-missile defence were extremely remote. Nevertheless, the stakes were so high and the resources available to the Soviet Union and to the United States were so great that it was impossible entirely to discount the possibility that such a defensive system might eventually be developed. Moreover, if one side or the other made significant progress in this field, even if it fell short of a completely effective system, or if they could plausibly claim to have done so, the balance of the deterrent might be decisively upset. Consequently, in the absence of an adequately controlled ban on nuclear tests, neither the West nor the Soviet Union could afford to renounce the effort necessary to try to make progress in this field.

4. Value of Christmas Island

There are various places in which further nuclear tests could be conducted but there are objections to all of them. Nevada is too near populated areas, Johnston Island is very small and Eniwetok, as well as being a trust territory, would take longer to re-activate than Christmas Island. Tests could be conducted from ships at sea, but these would be very expensive and it would take a long time to mount them. The existing facilities at Christmas Island are in good repair and could be adapted in two or three months, and the area is large enough to accommodate the several thousand people needed for a large series of tests rapidly conducted. There is also space on the island for the large number of instruments needed. The Americans would not, however, propose to conduct at Christmas Island the whole of the new series of tests which they have in mind. The very high altitude tests would be made elsewhere. They also indicated that they would refrain from making at Christmas Island any tests involving explosions on the ground or in barges, which would entail especially large danger of ground contamination.

5. Purposes of the proposed tests

The President and his advisers explained in some detail exactly what they wished to achieve by the proposed series of tests. These would include high altitude tests to measure effects on missiles carrying nuclear warheads and on radar and radio communications; tests of existing warheads which might pave the way for weight reductions; and other tests of various advanced designs also with the aim of reducing weight. The advantage of making warheads lighter is that decoys and other electronic devices can be carried. All the proposed tests are therefore directly related to the possibilities of developing or defeating an anti-missile system. It would be hard to argue that these are not "necessary in order to maintain the balance of the deterrent". The threat is not immediate but may become so even by 1964.

6. President Kennedy's attitude

President Kennedy made it clear that he had not yet decided to resume nuclear tests in the atmosphere. He said specifically that he wished to avoid taking this decision if he conscientiously could. At the same time, he indicated that he was likely to decide in the spring of 1962 that tests must be resumed unless by then some substantial improvement had taken place in East/West relations. And meanwhile he felt that he could not avoid making the preparations necessary in order

to enable the United States to resume testing if in three or four months' time such a decision seemed right. The President hoped that the United Kingdom would agree both to support a United States decision to resume atmospheric testing if this were made and to share in the tests by putting Christmas Island at the disposal of the United States. He felt that agreement on both these points should be simultaneous, although action on the second would have to be taken before the first decision had been made.

7. I made clear the distaste with which the United Kingdom Government contemplated any further resumption of nuclear tests. In particular, I expressed the strong view that the West should not resume nuclear tests unless they were satisfied that it was impracticable to halt the nuclear arms race. Without prejudice to the immediate question, therefore, I proposed that the United States and the United Kingdom should jointly consider the possibility of some fresh initiative in the field of disarmament. President Kennedy was not, I thought, opposed to such a plan in principle, but he could not see any practical method of carrying it out. I undertook to let him have my detailed thoughts as soon as possible.

8. On the immediate issue I explained that I could not agree to the use of Christmas Island without consulting my Cabinet colleagues. I also told the President that a formal agreement would be necessary about American use of Christmas Island and proposed that our experts should consider this question at once without prejudice to any final decision. Finally, I told President Kennedy that I recognised that, if the Cabinet decided to allow the United States to use Christmas Island for nuclear testing and the United States consequently devoted time and effort to preparations on the island, it would be unreasonable for the United Kingdom Government to claim more than a right to be consulted about the final decision; we could not ask for a veto at that stage.

9. I therefore ask my colleagues to consider whether we should now agree to offer the United States Government the use of the facilities at Christmas Island for part of the series of atmospheric nuclear tests which they may decide to hold in 1962. Such an offer would be made on their understanding that:-

- (a) A formal agreement must first be concluded on the financial and administrative arrangements for the use of these facilities.
- (b) The President would consider carefully and consult the United Kingdom before taking a final decision to resume tests.
- (c) We would support whatever decision President Kennedy made.

I think myself that such an offer should also be made conditional on United States acceptance in principle of a Western initiative to halt the nuclear arms race by agreement.

10. On this basis I believe that we could:-

- (a) Defend a decision to bring Christmas Island to a state of readiness for renewed testing, "as a matter of prudent planning for the future", in the words of the Bermuda communique.
- (b) Defend an eventual United States decision to hold the further series of atmospheric tests which they have in mind as necessary to maintain the balance of the deterrent and which would therefore be within the terms of the public statements made by President Kennedy and myself on 1st November and 31st October respectively.

H.M.

Admiralty House, S. W. 1.

1st January, 1962.

E.R.



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