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Review by **Helen Parr**, University of Keele

Kristan Stoddart leads the field in bringing into the public domain the previously hidden history of the United Kingdom's programme to improve the warheads of its Polaris missiles.¹ The programme began life as Super Antelope under the Harold Wilson government of 1966-70, and was codenamed Chevaline in 1974.

Stoddart's work on Chevaline illuminates the rationale that underlay the perceived need to improve Polaris. The development in the USSR of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defences threatened to undermine the credibility of Britain's nuclear weapons. British planners believed that Britain's arsenal had to sustain the capability to destroy Moscow.² This, the "Moscow criterion" did not simply indicate a desire to lay waste to Soviet civilization. Rather, the British realized that Soviet ABM defences meant, in the words of Michael (later Sir Michael) Quinlan, Deputy Under-Secretary of State (Policy and Programmes) in the Ministry of Defence in 1977: "abandoning the attempt to be seen as capable of defeating it [ABM defence] would have entailed conceding effective sanctuary to a very large area around the city... in the order of tens of thousands of square miles" (290). To upgrade Britain's nuclear weapons, by means of improving the "front ends" of the missiles in order to overcome ABM defences, was thus central to the British concept of deterrence. To keep up to date with leading developments in weapons technology was also essential

¹ Kristan Stoddart. "The Wilson Government and British Responses to ABMs, 1964-1970." *Contemporary British History* 33: 1 (2009) 1-33; John Baylis and Kristan Stoddart. "Britain and the Chevaline Project: The hidden nuclear programme, 1967-82." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26: 4 (December 2003) 124-55; Kristan Stoddart. "Nuclear Weapons in Britain's Policy Towards France, 1960-1974", *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 18: 4 (December 2007) 719-44.

² Kristan Stoddart. "Maintaining the Moscow Criterion: British Strategic Nuclear Targeting, 1974-1979." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 31: 6 (December 2008) 897-924.

in order to preserve Britain's close relationship with the United States in this field, and hence was a means to uphold British influence in America and internationally.

This article is a detailed examination of the developments of the Chevaline programme under the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan 1974-79. This period has hitherto received less attention, as the documents are more recently available, and as the period is sandwiched between two more striking phases in British nuclear history. Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, 1970-4, was renowned for adopting a more distant stance towards the US, focusing on Britain's relations with France and Europe, and in the early 1980s, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher apparently turned back to consolidate the "special relationship", purchasing Trident from the US. Stoddart has consulted documents from the Ministry of Defence, as well as some from the Ministerial Committee on Nuclear Policy (MCNP), and this focus on the strategic aspects of Britain's nuclear policy is reflected in the article.

The most revealing part of the article concerns the further developments in Anglo-French nuclear co-operation. Co-operation with the French on a possible successor system to Polaris had been investigated during the Heath government, but had not got off the ground mainly because of reluctance in France and uncertainty about American intentions, as Washington also made its own, highly secret, moves to assist France's warhead development.³ Stoddart shows that talks had been ongoing with the French about co-operation on tactical nuclear weapons, but he then suggests that the British detected a possible shift in France's attitude towards collaboration with the UK, when Yvon Bourges, the French Defence Minister, made a tentative approach to Fred Mulley, the British Defence Secretary, in April 1977. This shift resulted essentially from concerns within France about the credibility of their deterrent.

Quinlan questioned that the French strategic missiles were adequate to meet the "Moscow criterion". French submarines were vulnerable to detection; and UK analyses of French tests revealed that there were doubts about the "hardness" of the re-entry vehicles containing the warheads. These re-entry vehicles may not have been able to withstand defensive nuclear bursts from Soviet ABMs. Hence, Quinlan recommended that Callaghan suggest to France's President Giscard d'Estaing, at their meeting in April 1977, co-operation based on British submarines and French missiles. Some discussion continued between Foreign Secretary David Owen and his counterparts in 1978, but formidable obstacles remained, not least British and French divergent attitudes towards NATO (296-300).

Stoddart also discloses some intriguing departmental rivalry in the management of Chevaline. Chevaline originally operated from the Ministry of Defence, but control of it passed to the Royal Navy. Rear Admiral David Scott was appointed to take charge, even

³ Richard H. Ullman. "The Covert French Connection." *Foreign Policy*. 75 (Summer 1989) 3-33.

though the Ministry of Defence argued that Scott was “pathologically anti-Chevaline”, and Scott did not get on with either Dr. Frank Panton or Victor Macklen, the two most senior scientists on the project. Panton resigned, and the interview material Stoddart has with Panton as well as Panton’s own writings on the subject, detailed in the footnotes, suggest that one reason for the MoD’s ceding of control of the Chevaline programme to the Navy was to stall the Navy’s consistent requests for the purchase of Poseidon from the United States (294).

Stoddart argues that the Labour governments did not deviate from previous government decisions to continue to develop Britain’s nuclear programme, in keeping with the “Moscow criterion”. However, he does suggest that domestic political problems meant that Wilson and Callaghan were forced to handle the issue differently than Conservative governments. He posits that potential pressure from unilateralists within the Labour party encouraged Wilson to keep the Chevaline programme a tight secret. The costs of Chevaline, funded in three to six monthly cycles, escalated, and while Wilson admitted to the Labour Cabinet that a “little bit of modernization was going on”, he prevented an “informed discussion in Cabinet” (291).

Moreover, information about the underground tests necessary to investigate the front ends of the missiles was also kept from Parliament. Following criticism after a test in 1974, the government sought to minimize publicity. Policy was to indicate that tests were probable in order to “maintain the credibility of the deterrent”, but that it was not possible to release further information on security grounds; and that any test would be announced only “after a preliminary evaluation has been made of its results” (302).

Stoddart’s focus is on the strategic and technical aspects of the Chevaline project, but it would be interesting to investigate further the politics within the Labour party and government concerning the nuclear upgrade. The charge that Wilson deliberately obfuscated information about Chevaline, the hint that this may have increased the cost of the programme, and the implication that Polaris Improvement was deliberately and cleverly removed, by excluding the Chancellor Denis Healy from discussions during the 1975 budget cuts is a serious one (293, 306). It would merit further elaboration. Moreover, while Wilson’s capacity for obfuscation was legendary, it would be interesting also to examine further Callaghan’s handling of the party on this issue.

In 1978, Stoddart demonstrates that costs were running at four times their original estimates and MCNP seriously discussed cancelling the project. Unfortunately, the documentary evidence about this period was not fully released at the time of Stoddart’s writing of this article, and so he is unable to discuss further the government’s decision to continue to the end of the project. In his memoirs, Foreign Secretary David Owen testifies that he supported purchasing a Cruise missile from the United States instead as it would be cheaper. He also opposed the 1979 tests as they might damage the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty negotiations (304).

It would appear as if a major consideration in continuing the programme, and the tests, was that it would improve Britain's standing in the US. Tests of the warhead conducted in 1979 revealed information that was highly significant for the Americans. British designs were considered "state of the art", and created the possibility that a lighter warhead, with a smaller trigger, could be developed in the future. The 1979 test was also the first test of a "physics package suitable for use in a high speed re-entry vehicle such as that used in the US Poseidon missile". Therefore, there was potentially immediate benefit if the UK decided to purchase a US designed successor system to Polaris (304).

This is interesting, particularly in the light of recent revelations that in early 1979, Callaghan secured agreement from President Carter that Britain could buy Trident. Ever the patriot, Callaghan was so anxious this sale should go ahead he broke with Whitehall precedent to leave detailed technical reports for the incoming Conservative administration to make the case for the purchase of Trident.⁴ If Callaghan had won the 1979 election, then he would undoubtedly have continued with the process of buying Trident, and thus would have faced the considerable task of convincing the Labour party to accept this decision.

This article is essential for anyone researching the history of Britain's nuclear deterrent in this period. Although it could go further in illuminating the domestic politics of the Chevaline programme, its focus is primarily the strategic and technological aspects of Britain's nuclear history, reflected in Stoddart's use mainly of DEFE documents. The limitation of the documentary evidence, particularly in the last few years of the programme, also means that Stoddart's definitive judgment on the success or otherwise of Chevaline is still pending. The publication next year of Stoddart's two volumes on British nuclear history 1964-76 will be very welcome.

Helen Parr is Lecturer in International Relations at Keele University, UK. She has published extensively on British and French policies towards European integration in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her book, *British Policy towards the European Community: Harold Wilson and Britain's World Role* was published by Routledge in 2006. She is currently developing projects on aspects of Britain's Cold War, and is working on Anglo-French nuclear co-operation, and Britain's policies towards European co-operation and European détente, during the Heath government, 1970-4.

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⁴ Sanchia Berg. "Breaking the Iron Law." The Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, 30 December 2009. http://cdnedge.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8433000/8433866.stm Accessed 25 November 2010.