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ABR30 – SCSA NOTE – THE ARGENTINE AIRCRAFT CARRIER (cab 148/212)

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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND
FALKLAND ISLANDS

THE ARGENTINE AIRCRAFT CARRIER

Note by the Secretaries

The attached note by the Ministry of Defence is circulated for consideration by the Sub-Committee at their meeting on 1 May.

Signed ROBERT ARMSTRONG
R L WADE-GERY
R L L FACER

Cabinet Office

30 April 1982

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The Argentine Aircraft Carrier

Note by the Ministry of Defence

1. This paper identifies the military threat posed to our forces in the South Atlantic by the Argentine aircraft carrier "25th of May", formulates options for eliminating that threat.

The Threat

2. Argentina has one old aircraft carrier. However, she can carry 7 to 9 Skyhawk and, possibly, up to 5 Super Etendard aircraft. Both types of aircraft are capable of mounting air-to-surface and air-to-air attacks at a distance of about 400 miles from the carrier. The 6 Tracker aircraft can carry out radar surveillance operations up to 500 miles from the carrier, giving her the capability to direct other air and naval units into attack positions as well as using her own offensive aircraft. Her own helicopters would provide limited ASW capability. The Argentines are thus able to threaten our forces from the air at a great distance from the Argentine mainland. We would expect the carrier to be escorted by 2 or 3 other vessels with a balanced ship-borne surface-to-air and surface-to-surface capability.

What is Threatened

3. The threat is posed to:
- a. The main amphibious Task Force on passage from Ascension Island, which will be only lightly escorted by RN warships and RAF aircraft;
 - b. Our forces engaged in enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ);
 - c. Vessels in the continuing re-supply and reinforcement chain from Ascension Island;
 - d. Aircraft undertaking maritime and other operations south of Ascension Island.

Capability to Defeat the Threat

4. Argentine carrier-launched aircraft engaging our forces can be countered by our own aircraft, by anti-aircraft missiles and by neutralising the carrier. The Sea Harriers will be stretched to cope with land based Argentine aircraft which challenge the TEZ and may be near the end of their radius of action. The additional threat from carrier based aircraft launched outside but close to the TEZ would further extend air resources, leaving little offensive effort available for other priority targets. Without air cover from the Harriers, our ships would look to their anti-aircraft missiles for air defence and against attacks on the scale which could be launched from "25th of May" this could be inadequate, particularly on the re-supply/reinforcement route from Ascension. The best Defence, therefore, would be to neutralise the carrier itself.

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Options

5. There would seem to be broadly 5 options for achieving this objective.

a. To sink the carrier as soon as possible wherever she is on the high seas.

Action against the carrier could be taken by our surface ships, Harriers or submarines. Attack would best be made without warning, though one could be issued if politically desirable. Under this option, the carrier could have been neutralised before it became a threat to our forces, and the threat would be removed permanently. This option would, therefore, be the safest and most economical from a military point of view. It might not be attractive in legal or political terms.

b. To sink the carrier if an attack was made on our Naval or Air Forces by any Argentine Unit anywhere.

Action could be taken by any of our forces suitably positioned. It could enable a major threat to our forces to be permanently removed immediately any Argentine attack was delivered. This might well be before the carrier had herself been able to deliver an attack. This option is attractive militarily but it does not in itself prevent the carrier getting into a position ready to deliver a pre-emptive attack before other hostilities had broken out. As it is retaliatory in nature, the political and legal objections may be less. We could first warn the Argentines of our intentions, to retaliate, if they were first to take any offensive action against our naval and air forces.

c. To induce "25th of May" to return to port and stay there.

We would issue a warning to the Argentine to withdraw the "25th of May" to port within 48 hours. After that time, if she remained at sea, or put to sea again, she would be liable to attack wherever encountered by our forces. Militarily, this option is less attractive than A or B because we could not be sure of enforcing it, and even if we did, the carrier would remain a potential threat. Our action might be difficult to justify in legal or political terms.

d. To induce the "25th of May" to stay within the Argentine internationally recognised territorial waters of 12nm off-shore, and north of 43° S.

This would be implemented similarly to Option C. It would be more difficult to enforce, and the carrier would remain a potential threat. This option, as it to an extent recognises Argentine rights within their territorial waters, might be easier to justify politically than A or C. (Although Article 51 of the UN Charter might not provide sufficient legal basis).

e. To confine the "25th of May" within an area bounded by the parallel 43° S and the rhumb-line connecting the positions 43° S 56° W and 23° S 35° W.

This boundary would attempt to confine the carrier to an area from which it could not mount attacks against either the

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the amphibious and other shipping on passage from Ascension or our forces enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ). In one respect, this regime would be more difficult to enforce than options B or C. since it would depend upon timely and accurate intelligence about the carrier's movements. Against that, the boundary is well off-shore and our forces would be less inhibited by shore-based aircraft or the need to operate in shallow water. This regime would be introduced by a warning to the Argentine navy of our intentions, and of the action liable to be taken against "25th of May" if she moved outside the boundary. This action could be more easily defended in relation to Article 51 of the UN Charter than options A, C and D., and presentationally it could have the advantage of similarity with the MEZ and now TEZ which we have imposed around the Falkland Islands, but it would exert less pressure.

Implementation

6. Which ever option is preferred, it would be for the Task Group Commander to decide how to enforce it. He has at his disposal surface ships, Harriers or SSNs.

a. Destroyers and Frigates would attack the "25th of May" with surface-to-surface missiles. To do so, they would need to approach the carrier in the face of attack from her aircraft and her surface escorts armed with EXOCET missiles. It would be necessary to divert substantial forces from the enforcement of the TEZ.

b. Harriers would attack with 1,000 lb bombs. In the numbers likely to be available, they could be vulnerable both to missile defence and the carrier's own aircraft. They too would be diverted from enforcing the TEZ.

c. SSNs would attack with torpedoes. A SSN could be instructed to shadow the carrier at all times. This would be difficult to achieve if the "25th of May" was operating in water less than 35 fathoms as she has been recently. The shadowing task can be further complicated by the use of speed by the carrier and aggressive escorting.

On balance, a SSN would give the greatest chance of success with the least prejudice to other operations. Following a torpedo attack from an SSN, the "25th of May" should be disabled. It is possible that she might sink quickly, but this is unlikely given good damage control practices. An attack by gunfire, missiles or bombs should also result in severe damage to the carrier or loss of life. If the carrier did sink, it is possible that a large proportion of her crew numbering 1,000 would have time to abandon ship with life rafts. Her escorting vessels should be able to pick up survivors.

Summary

7. The foregoing makes it clear that on strictly military grounds Option A offers the most economic and likely prospect of neutralising the threat to our forces from the "25th of May". We recognise, however, that the legal basis for such action could be difficult to establish, and that the political reaction to it could

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be difficult Option B, being retaliatory in nature, is less open to legal and military objections. It offers a good chance of neutralising the carrier before she has delivered a pre-emptive attack but only if other Argentine forces attack first. It would prevent the carrier obtaining a position from which she could pose an immediate and great threat to our forces, before hostilities broke out elsewhere. It is not, therefore, in itself a solution to the problem. Militarily Option C is clearly the next best course and its legal basis and public presentation could be easier to sustain. Option D is less attractive militarily, although its legal basis and its public presentation could also be easier to sustain. In both options C and D, Argentina is likely to object strongly and is unlikely to comply. Option E is militarily the least attractive but it is the most acceptable legally. Politically it is the least stark but also applies the least pressure on the Argentines. Accepting it would still allow their carrier freedom within a sizeable area.

Recommendation

8. Ministers are invited to consider the options summarised above.

29 April 1982

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