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OD(SA)(82) 37th Meeting

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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

MINUTES of a Meeting held at 10 Downing Street on TUESDAY 18 MAY 1982 at 9.30 am

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PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon John Nott
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Cecil Parkinson MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Paymaster General

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Admiral of the Fleet
Sir Terence Lewin
Chief of the Defence Staff

Admiral Sir Henry Leach
Chief of Naval Staff and First Sea Lord

General Sir Edwin Bramall
Chief of the General Staff

Air Chief Marshal
Sir Michael Beetham
Chief of the Air Staff

Sir Antony Acland
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Sir Michael Palliser
Cabinet Office

SECRETARIAT

Mr R L Wade-Gery
Mr R L L Facer
Brigadier J A C G Eyre

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1. MILITARY ISSUES

THE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE STAFF briefed the Sub-Committee on the latest military situation.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Sub-Committee now faced a major political decision: whether to authorise the military repossession of the Falkland Islands, provided that this was militarily feasible and that no acceptable diplomatic settlement could be negotiated. The possibility of a peaceful settlement would be exhausted if Argentina had not accepted the final British proposals before the given deadline expired at 5 pm London time on 19 May. It was for the Chiefs of Staff to advise on military feasibility. At their military briefing before their meeting on 14 May the Sub-Committee had been informed of the Force Commander's plans for a landing and subsequent repossession. Under this plan the landing could take place on the night of 20/21 May - or as soon thereafter as weather and other local factors permitted - provided that it was authorised by the Sub-Committee at their present meeting. The Sub-Committee now needed to have the professional military advice of the Chiefs of Staff on whether repossession of the Falklands was militarily feasible and whether the Force Commander's plan was the best means of achieving it and had a good chance of success.

THE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE STAFF said that the Chiefs of Staff had been providing the military options against which diplomatic efforts to obtain a negotiated settlement could continue. It now seemed that a satisfactory settlement could not be negotiated. The next option they recommended was a landing to repossess the Islands, in accordance with the Force Commander's plan. They supported his view that a long blockade was not viable and they therefore recommended that the landing should go ahead as soon as practicable. Once British forces were ashore they should press ahead in order to achieve either satisfactory conditions for a ceasefire and withdrawal or the surrender of the Argentine garrison. There were of course risks; from the Argentinian fleet, including submarines, and especially from air attack. Attrition of Argentine forces had been less than had been hoped, because they had stayed in or close to their bases. But the Chiefs of Staff and the Force Commander believed that the risks were militarily acceptable, as were the

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losses which could reasonably be expected; and that once ashore the landing force would have a very good chance of success. They were therefore seeking political authority to proceed with the landing. If this were given at the present meeting, the latest moment at which it could be countermanded would be the afternoon (London time) of 20 May. Unless the weather imposed delays, the landing forces would by then be inside the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ); the ships involved would be heavily loaded for the landing, and if authority to proceed were suspended for any significant period at that stage they would need to withdraw and regroup.

THE CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF said that, in the absence of a negotiated Argentine withdrawal, military force had to be used. The Force Commander was clear that it would be difficult to sustain a long blockade. Therefore the only option was a landing. His major concern about a landing arose from the Argentine Air Force not having so far committed themselves in any strength. They had suffered losses, but they had certainly not been neutralised. They still had significant numbers of Skyhawk, Super Etendard and Mirage aircraft. They had overcome the problem of locating British ships on the move, to the extent that they had sunk one such ship and almost sunk another. Once the landing began their task would be easier; British ships would be within range and in known positions. If they launched an all-out air effort, as their commander had now publicly threatened to do, full air defence of British forces could not be guaranteed; some aircraft were likely to get through and more British ships could be lost. Since British ships would be at their most vulnerable during the landing phase, the Force Commander would need to minimise exposure time by taking maximum advantage of night, when the threat from the air would be much smaller. Once the landing forces were ashore and dispersed they would be less vulnerable, because air attack against them would be much harder to mount. The Argentines would also have difficulty in providing their own forces with close air support. He was therefore confident that the landing forces would achieve success. But pockets of resistance could make total repossession protracted; and in that case British forces could have problems of attrition both on land and in enforcing the TEZ to prevent Argentine resupply. The point of decision

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had now been reached. Delay would be possible, but only at the risk of further losses. Although more softening up time would be an advantage, the Force Commander on balance advised against waiting. Risks would be involved, as with any military option; but they were risks which had to be taken. He believed that the landing should be authorised now, and the final timing left to the Force Commander.

THE CHIEF OF NAVAL STAFF said that he supported the Chief of the Defence Staff's appreciation. British forces would face four threats. In ascending order of severity these were Argentine forces in the Islands; naval surface forces; submarines; and aircraft, both carrier-based and shore-based. He was confident that the first two threats could be neutralised effectively. The submarine threat was more elusive and the risk from it considerably greater. But British forces had extensive anti-submarine assets and in the light of the outline plan for their use he was confident of effective neutralisation of the submarine threat, albeit perhaps with some loss. Because air superiority had not yet really been established over the operating area (though this could change before the landing took place) some losses from air attack were likely. But in his judgement the level of this threat was an acceptable war risk, given the selected beach head, British anti-aircraft assets and their planned deployment, and sensible use of darkness. Two other factors were important. The longer British forces delayed the greater would be the attrition they suffered, not least from accidental causes. And if Britain hung back now, the erosion of her national standing, both in general and as regards negotiations in the present crisis, would be profound and long-term. He concluded that the advantages which Britain stood to gain outweighed the risks and likely losses involved and that the landing should proceed.

THE CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF said that he associated himself with the Chief of the Defence Staff's comments. He believed that there was now no option but to mount a landing. The attrition of Argentine assets by air and other means was very important. Once this had been given full scope and allowed to take whatever toll it could, the sooner a landing took place the better. Given luck, which would certainly be needed, the operation to repossess the Islands could turn out to be a great success,

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In that event, Britain's status in the world, the respect shown to her and the strength and credibility of her own deterrent strategy would be that much more enhanced for years to come. Ultimately, whatever happened, he believed that the British forces could win through. All the actions taken up to the present moment, from the sailing of the Task Force onwards, had been appropriate and correctly calculated. The final act of repossession did, in his judgement, produce larger risks, particularly in respect of the air threat and in the initial stages (ie the landing and build up before troops were firmly established ashore), than would normally have been considered appropriate in an operation of the present sort. Air superiority was, after all, one of the modern principles of war; and it had not yet been achieved. But he believed that in the circumstances, in the absence of any alternatives, those risks would have to be taken and any resulting casualties to troops and ships accepted. Once the decision was taken he had every confidence that the Force Commander's plan, which reduced the risks to the minimum, would be pushed through by all ranks of the British Task Force with the greatest resolution, courage and skill. Once the troops were ashore, the risks would decrease markedly. At some stage it should be possible to use what was expected to become a formidable and secure presence ashore as a means of achieving British aims and getting a lasting settlement. He hoped that this could be done without necessarily involving either major bloodshed around Port Stanley or the permanent stationing of land and naval forces in what strategically he regarded as entirely the wrong part of the world.

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL said that, since British territory was involved, the military operations now contemplated were legally compatible with the self-defence provisions of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and with Security Council Resolution no. 502. This compatibility would also extend to operations elsewhere provided they were in response to a serious threat to British forces.

In discussion, all the members of the Sub-Committee expressed their support for going ahead with the landing and repossession operations under consideration, unless by the afternoon of 20 May it was clear that an acceptable diplomatic settlement was available.

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In further discussion, the following points were made -

a. The air threat was a more dangerous factor than was generally realised. This would need to be made clear to the Cabinet.

b. Casualties were impossible to predict. British public opinion would be more concerned over loss of British life than over loss of ships or equipment.

c. Although the Chiefs of Staff hoped that the use of military force to complete repossession of the Islands might be avoided once a landing had been securely achieved, they were satisfied that such repossession would if necessary be militarily possible.

d. Once landing and repossession operations began, international and other pressures for a cease fire would become intense. The longer such operations took, the harder it would become to secure the objectives desired.

e. Because of the crucial military importance of confining knowledge of the proposed landing to the narrowest possible circle, it would be preferable not to inform the Cabinet before 20 May.

f. A Ministry of Defence broadcasting operation to the Argentine garrison in the Falklands, as proposed in OD(SA)(82) 50, was likely to be publicly disowned and criticised by the British Broadcasting Corporation. But it could have a valuable psychological effect on the garrison and could therefore save British lives.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Sub-Committee were unanimous in authorising the landing and repossession operations envisaged in the plan put forward by the Force Commander and endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff. The operations should therefore proceed, unless the Sub-Committe took a specific decision to the contrary not later than on the afternoon of 20 May. It would be for the Force Commander to decide, in the light of local considerations, whether the landing should be made on the night of 20/21 May or later. The proposal for broadcasting to the Argentine garrison was approved.

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The Sub-Committee -

1. Invited the Defence Secretary to authorise the Force Commander to proceed with the landing and repossession operations he had proposed, on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.

2. Invited the Defence Secretary to arrange for the implementation of the broadcasting proposal in OD(SA)(82) 50.

2. DIPLOMATIC ISSUES

The Sub-Committee had before them notes by the Secretaries (OD(SA)(82) 53 and 54) setting out the text of the draft interim agreement which the British Representative at the United Nations, Sir Antony Parsons, had on 17 May handed to the United Nations Secretary General, Senor Perez de Cuellar; telegrams nos. 765-6 and 768 from Sir Antony Parsons reporting on the situation at the United Nations; Luxembourg telegram no. 149 reporting on the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council; and Foreign and Commonwealth Office telegram no. 56 to Luxembourg reporting on negotiations between Foreign Ministers of the European Community.

THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY said that Senor Perez de Cuellar's reaction to the British draft had been reasonably encouraging. He had also been given the British side letter spelling out the exclusion of South Georgia. Senor Perez de Cuellar had since seen the Argentine Deputy Foreign Minister; but it was not entirely clear that he had handed over the text of the British document, and this was being urgently checked. In public Senor Perez de Cuellar had not revealed the existence of either the document or the deadline; this was welcome. There would need to be further consultation with him about how he would proceed once the deadline had passed. So far the Argentines had not submitted any document of their own. Meanwhile the United States Secretary of State, Mr Haig, had indicated privately in Luxembourg that he could not envisage the United States acting alone to verify or guarantee an agreement; that he would consider further whether joint

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action with other countries, such as Brazil, Peru or France, might be possible; and that he was confident Argentina would not invade again if an agreement had once been reached.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that at their meeting that day the Cabinet would be shown the text of the British draft agreement; they would be told that Senor Perez de Cuellar expected Argentina's reply to it not later than 19 May. In response to an approach from the Leader of the Opposition she would suggest a Parliamentary debate on the crisis on 20 May; this would focus on the British draft agreement, which should be tabled in Parliament earlier that day. She and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary would be the principal speakers, and no answer would be given to questions about military operations. If the Argentines had not accepted the British document she would make clear to Parliament that the offer it contained had lapsed.

The Sub-Committee -

Took note.

Cabinet Office

18 May 1982