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WLB

Prime Minister

To see, pending the
defence secretary's reply.

FCS/83/211

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A.S.C. 25/11

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE

RN Task Group Deployment to Hong Kong

1. There has been discussion between our officials about planning for the deployment to Hong Kong of the RN Task Group currently visiting South-East Asia. I understand that your planning involves a visit to Hong Kong in February/March 1984 by the flagship 'Invincible', together with separate overlapping visits by two pairs of smaller warships and accompanying RFAs. As you may appreciate, these plans raise considerable problems at a time when we are involved in difficult and sensitive negotiations with the Chinese about the territory's future.

2. The Chinese reacted badly to the first (albeit misleading) press reports about the deployment.

There is a clear risk that they will react adversely to a large-scale naval visit to Hong Kong, in the context of the current negotiations, as an exercise in gunboat diplomacy designed to intimidate or put pressure on them (I understand that the last time an RN aircraft carrier visited Hong Kong was in 1970). Whether they genuinely take this view or feel bound to react in order to preserve face, or seize on the visit as a pretext to make propaganda capital, is very largely immaterial. There would be a real danger of souring the atmosphere in talks whose successful prosecution must be an overriding priority for us. The Chinese might choose to make a propaganda issue of this which would have a severe effect on confidence in Hong Kong.

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3. After careful consideration I have concluded that we should not agree to anything more than a low-key visit to Hong Kong by units of the Task Group. More specifically I must ask that 'Invincible''s itinerary should be rearranged to omit Hong Kong altogether, while the visits by frigates and destroyers should be staggered so that no more than two warships are there at a time. This request is in line with the firm advice of both the Governor of Hong Kong and the Ambassador in Peking, who have been consulted again since the last round of Sino-British talks. Both feel that the danger of an adverse Chinese reaction to a high-profile naval deployment is very real, and that there can be no advantage in 'Invincible''s visiting Hong Kong which outweighs the potential damage to the Sino-British negotiations.

4. I am well aware that there are arguments in the other direction. It might be argued that we were giving the Chinese an effective veto over deployments to a major British naval base; that a leak of information about our changed intentions could suggest capitulation to Chinese pressure; and that the omission of Hong Kong from 'Invincible''s itinerary could damage morale both in the territory and among the ship's crew. Against all this I consider that, in the present very unusual circumstances, confrontation with the Chinese over this issue could have serious implications. Likewise confidence in Hong Kong would be more seriously affected by a Chinese propaganda campaign surrounding 'Invincible''s presence than by the ship's absence. As for the danger of a leak, I can only suggest that decisions should be taken soon, and that in the meantime preparation for any deployment to Hong Kong should be carried out with the minimum publicity. The longer decisions are delayed the more likely there is to be a leak to the press, and the more likely it will seem that we are bowing to pressure from Peking.



5. I am most reluctant to disrupt your planning in this way: and I realise too that there will be considerable disappointment both among the Chiefs of Staff and among those associated with 'Invincible'. We have, however, a number of ideas on alternative deployments in the region for 'Invincible' and for any other vessel displaced by revised planning. I suggest that our officials get together soon to discuss this, and to see how the bunching of visits to Hong Kong might be avoided.

6. I am copying this minute to the Prime Minister.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. Howe', written in a cursive style.

(GEOFFREY HOWE)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
25 October 1983

25 OCT 1983

