



Prime Minister 8

The Defence Secretary has accepted the Foreign Secretary's view that Invincible should not visit Hong Kong and that the visits of other ships should be staggered. There may be public comment.

A.S.C. 10/11

MO 25/15

9th November 1983

Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary

RN TASK GROUP DEPLOYMENT TO HONG KONG

In your minute of 25th October you asked that the plans for HMS INVINCIBLE to visit Hong Kong early in the New Year should be dropped and that the programmes of the accompanying destroyer and frigates should also be rearranged to reduce the visibility of their visits.

2. Cancellation of INVINCIBLE's visit would come as a bitter disappointment, both to the ship's company and to their wives, families and friends. The visit was programmed not only to allow for a substantial period of self-maintenance but also, and importantly, to give the ship's company a well-earned break after a heavy programme of goodwill visits, demonstrations and exercises. Hong Kong is an especially popular port of call and its deletion from the ship's programme will come especially hard after INVINCIBLE has earned such glowing reports during her recent visits to India, Malaysia and Singapore. Wives and dependants have been planning for several months to fly out to join the ship, on especially favourable financial terms which Hong Kong is unique in being able to offer. The only sensible alternative to Hong Kong would be Singapore, because of the need for self-maintenance; but since costs are considerably higher, far fewer dependants could be expected to be able to afford to fly out there. The disappointment and consequential dampening effect on morale, both on board ship and at home, should not be under-rated.

3. If there was any prospect of the advice from our Ambassador in Peking and the Governor of Hong Kong altering in the weeks ahead there might be some attraction in keeping our options open a little longer.



But the grounds for optimism are not great; and since time is in any case fast running out if alternative arrangements are to be made, especially for the families, we need to take a firm decision now.

4. We must recognise that we will face tricky presentational problems if the news that the programme has been altered becomes public. There is already speculation in the Hong Kong press about whether or not INVINCIBLE is to visit. Preliminary planning has been in hand for some months now ever since the outline programme was agreed by your Department, although at FCO request everything possible has been done latterly to keep this confidential. Leaving aside the risk that the news of any change of plan will leak out, INVINCIBLE will be known to be in the vicinity: she will be taking passage twice through the South China Sea en route to and from Japan.

5. So far as the Chinese are concerned I take it that you have discounted the possibility that they will seek to make capital of what could be represented as a climb down. It could be argued that, if they are seeking an opportunity to take us to task, they will seize it however many ships are present. There is also the question of attitudes in Hong Kong where there could be damaging speculation that omission of Hong Kong from INVINCIBLE's programme implies a weakening of resolve on the Government's part to safeguard the interests of the people of Hong Kong in the current negotiations. In this respect I presume you are satisfied there is no risk that, in response to such speculation, the Unofficial members of the Executive Council might request the reinstatement of Hong Kong in INVINCIBLE's itinerary.

6. For all these reasons, I have considerable misgivings about the cancellation of INVINCIBLE's visit. But as I cannot claim there are overriding military reasons to maintain the planned deployment, I must reluctantly agree to make the change in the programme for which you have asked. I have therefore asked my officials to put to yours revised proposals, which will allow also for the staggering of the visits by the other warships, as soon as possible. There will be little scope for flexibility: in particular, INVINCIBLE will have to proceed



straight to Singapore from Japan to undergo self-maintenance there instead of at Hong Kong. But I am sure that it will be possible to reach the early agreement that is now essential. It goes without saying that I should be strongly opposed to any further proposals to revise the Hong Kong element of the Task Group programme.

7. I am copying this minute to the Prime Minister and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "M. A. S.", written in a cursive style.

Ministry of Defence

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9 NOV 1972