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PRIME MINISTER

GULF CRISIS

Barring surprises, we face three main issues next week in the Gulf.

US/Soviet meeting in Helsinki

We shall know the outcome of the US/Soviet meeting in Helsinki by Monday. It ought to be something we can welcome, although I doubt the Russians are willing to go so far as to send forces to the Gulf, as suggested in some of today's papers. The best we can probably hope for is a re-affirmation of the objectives of the Security Council Resolutions and a joint determination to see them implemented, and perhaps an undertaking to withdraw Soviet advisers from Iraq.

Air Blockade

There is growing support for an air blockade of Iraq. I think I am right in saying that the US, France and Italy have all spoken out publicly in favour: and there was support for it at yesterday's meeting of EC Ministers. We have been rather reticent by comparison. There are two problems, one temporary the other more lasting. The temporary one is that we don't want Iraq to interrupt the evacuation flights for women and children. That means waiting until we are sure all those who want to leave have got out. The more permanent difficulty is that an air blockade would need to be implemented by countries whose airspace borders on Iraq, not all of whom are reliable (eg Jordan and Iran). An air blockade which was declared but patently ineffective might be worse than no blockade at all. But I don't think we should give up easily. I would like to see us take a lead in discussing both an air and a land blockade in the Security Council. We need constantly to be seen to be tightening the screw on Iraq.

Despatch of additional British forces

Tom King is considering over the weekend the composition of the additional British forces which we have already said publicly we shall despatch to the Gulf. I understand that he has been given a list of options, some of which could be combined. They probably include:

- additional Tornado, particularly the reconnaissance version. The US Commander has apparently identified a gap in his order of battle which these would fill;
- additional ground attack Tornado. From the point of view of the profile of our contribution these are valuable, because they would certainly be in the first wave of any military action;
- an aircraft carrier with Harrier aboard. I still find it hard to see the relevance of this. The United States already have four carriers in the area (and the French one): they cannot enter the Gulf because they become too much of a target: and aircraft are more effective from land bases. My understanding is that only the Navy and Alan Clark support this option;
- elements of 5 Brigade (essentially Paras). The problem is these are not very relevant to the kind of battle likely to be fought. Against the sort of entrenched defence positions which Iraq has established in Kuwait you need armour rather than light troops. The American Commander is apparently thinking of sending his own air-borne forces back to the States;
- an armoured brigade with tanks. This is what the Americans want, but you have (rightly) reservations about putting our tanks in the desert, given their very poor availability record;

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- a light armour force. This would make quite a lot of sense;
- Gurkhas. They would scare the Iraqis, but there might be a slight impression of exposing 'mercenaries' to danger rather than wholly British forces;
- specialised forces such as signallers, field hospitals, etc. They would be useful but ancillary, and make rather little political impact.

The list may not be exhaustive, but it is what I have been able to glean from MOD sources.

More widely, there is likely to be an argument over whether to send ground forces at all. The Foreign Office are opposed to this: their reasoning is that ours would be the only Western forces on the ground alongside the Americans and therefore potentially exposed in the Arab world. There is also some opposition in the MOD, based more on the view that the command and control arrangements for a British ground contingent would be horrendous. (There are already difficulties enough with so many different national contingents.)

You may like to reflect on this over the next day or so. I have told MOD that you will expect at least a preliminary statement of the options from Tom King at next Tuesday's meeting. My own view is that we should not shrink from sending ground forces, despite the difficulties. They are what the Americans and Saudis want, and if we are going to show solidarity, we may as well do so whole-heartedly. We might go for a combination of, say, 2,000/3,000 ground forces (probably light armour) and an additional squadron of Tornado. That would give us a very respectable contribution indeed. If you wanted to send more, you could then put in Gurkhas, provided there were also some British forces on the ground as well.

C.D.P.

CHARLES POWELL

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