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Jp 01184

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PRIME MINISTER

The Gulf: US Military Planning

If you are talking to the President in the next few days, I imagine you will want to say something about the implications of any American decision to send substantial reinforcements to the Gulf and the effect this is likely to have on the timing of any military operation.

2. It seems that the American military are recommending that another US corps should be despatched, that this will take two-and-a-half months, and that it will mean that the earliest date for launching any offensive would be 1 February. We cannot of course be sure that this recommendation has been accepted by the President. Nor can we be sure that we have the full picture of American planning: for example, the latest report hardly squares with what Scowcroft told Charles Powell last Friday. It may be that the President has taken into account all the factors and is insisting on an earlier date for American readiness.

3. But we cannot make this assumption. If the report is correct, and if it is acted on, the implications are serious. We must assume that there will be a certain slippage: 1 February could well become mid or even late February in actuality. As we know, and as the Americans recognise, there is a limited window of opportunity from November to March. After that the climate deteriorates; Ramadan supervenes; and a number of adverse factors begin to operate with increasing strength against us. Among them are the likelihood of a growing intolerance among Arab host countries for the presence of large Western forces; the probability that we shall have further trouble with the Palestinians; more spurious peace proposals; the boost to

Saddam Hussein from the apparent inaction of Western forces; and a likely weakening in Western public opinion. We have also to reckon with the fact that, while we may be improving the correlation of forces in our favour, we are by the same token giving the Iraqis more time to perfect their defences. A further timing factor to be taken into account is the Haj in June.

4. The Americans appeared to be alive to all these factors when I was in Washington last week and accepted the thrust of our analysis that we should not miss the November to March opening. The impact of a decision to reinforce along the lines above, however, could mean that on grounds of military prudence the President was taking a decision which endangered our chances of carrying out the operation at all.

5. You will want, I am sure, to stress our readiness to help in any way we can, whether by providing more forces within the limits of our resources or by assisting with transport, so as to speed up the US reinforcement. But in the midst of this packaging will have to lie the hard warning in paragraph 4 above.

6. There is another US theme which you may wish to touch on. It seems from our latest telegram from Washington that the President may be contemplating some action by special forces to rescue those currently in the US Embassy compound in Kuwait. I hope you will feel able to counsel against this. It has all the makings of a Carter-style failure and humiliation.

7. There is the related idea to which the President returns from time to time, that action should be taken, no doubt under the provisions of Security Council Resolution 674, to reprovision the US Embassy. If he is to embark on this course he should be clear beforehand what his objective is. If it is simply to demonstrate once again

Iraqi disregard for Security Council Resolutions and tot up another black mark against Saddam, all well and good. If, on the other hand, it is intended as the necessary provocation for action, we are into a very different game, and one which hardly accords with the information in paragraph 2 above that they are insisting upon heavy reinforcement before operations can be launched.

8. I am, as I am sure you are, highly suspicious of the "engineered provocation" line of thinking. The only sensible course, as I see it, is to carry out the necessary military preparations and act without warning as soon as we are ready, always on the understanding that that readiness is not postponed until a time when the whole coalition is likely to be unravelling.

  
PERCY CRADOCK

1 November 1990