

58. Telegram From the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State<sup>1</sup>

London, April 3, 1982, 1324Z

7429. Military Addressees Handle as Specat Exclusive. Subject: British Military Steps in the Falkland Dispute.

1. Entire text—Confidential.

2. Summary: Mrs. Thatcher is under considerable public pressure to take decisive steps in the Falkland dispute. But a military solution may be beyond her reach.<sup>2</sup> The question for her government is how much to put at risk militarily for reasons of politics and prestige. End summary.

3. The military difficulties for Britain of sustaining operations in the South Atlantic are awesome. If they want to go beyond gesture, Mrs. Thatcher's government must reckon that the task would be not only to dislodge the Argentines and restore the status quo, but to defend the Falklands for an indefinite time in the face of continued Argentine hostility. This certainly could not be done without a large and protracted diversion of military assets to the South Atlantic—where no other U.K. security interests are at stake. Conceivably, it could not be done at all.

4. Nevertheless, Mrs. Thatcher is under considerable pressure to act decisively. The popular press are running headlines like "Shame" (the *Daily Express*) and "It's War" (the *Sun*). The April 3 *Times* editorializes in favor of military steps against the Argentine Navy if Argentine troops are not withdrawn. The opposition is pointing out that the government ignored warning signs and failed to dispatch ships—as was done in the past—when tensions with Argentina increased. More-

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Department of State, Central Foreign Policy File, D820177-0587. Confidential; Immediate; Exdis. Sent for information Immediate to NATO Collective, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago, Moscow, USUN, the Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, USCINCEUR, USNMR SHAPE, CINCUSAFE, USLOSACLANT, and USSOUTHCOM.

<sup>2</sup> Summarizing the special session of Parliament held to discuss the Argentine landing, April 3, the Department reported as part of the Falkland Islands Situation Report Number 5: "Mrs. Thatcher declined to say whether the British fleet would be ordered to engage the Argentines. She said the aircraft carrier *Invincible* would sail April 5 to lead the task force. Press speculation goes as high as 35-40 ships. In debate, the Parliament was virtually unanimous in its call for military action, although speakers acknowledged that a diplomatic solution should be attempted." On Argentine troop strength, the report continued: "The Argentine military reportedly expect to have a 5 to 7,000 man highly trained force in place, with adequate air cover and fortification by the time the British task force could arrive." (Telegram 89892 to all Diplomatic and Consular Posts, the Department of Defense, USCINCSO, and CINCLANT, April 3; Department of State, Central Foreign Policy File, D820177-0717)

over, all this is playing against the background of long standing accusations that the government has gutted the Royal Navy surface fleet to support its pretensions as a nuclear power.

5. In response, Mrs. Thatcher announced in the Commons this morning, April 3, that she will dispatch a fleet on April 5 to the South Atlantic, headed by the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*. (We suspect elements of the British contingent in NATO exercise Springtrain off Gibraltar may already be on their way.) This will provide perhaps two weeks of breathing space for cooler heads to prevail domestically, and for international pressure to build for a political solution the British can accept. It also relieves the immediate political pressure on Mrs. Thatcher to take action. But it postpones rather than resolves Mrs. Thatcher's dilemma, and increases the political ante for her government—which could be faced with the ultimate and unpalatable choice of either fighting or backing down.

6. When the dust has cleared, whatever the outcome, the present Falkland dispute will have a major impact on the British defense debate. The issue of Royal Navy cutbacks, of Britain's ability to afford a future Trident fleet, and of Britain's military role in the world will all come under intense scrutiny. It is too early to predict the course or outcome of that debate; but we doubt that Mrs. Thatcher will emerge at the end without some changes in both personnel and policy.

**Streator**