

145. Telegram From the Department of State to Secretary of State Haig in Buenos Aires¹

Washington, April 17, 1982, 2348Z

Tosec 60095/104113. Subject: Timing of UK Task Force Arrival at Falklands.

1. Secret—Entire text.

2. Summary: It is becoming increasingly clear that the British will take longer than we anticipated to get effective forces on station off the Falklands. The naval forces have broken into four, widely spaced groups. The main body of the task force—carriers—should arrive at Ascension this weekend. Based on the assumption that most of the British ships will need to spend some time at Ascension to resupply and adjust their combat loads, it appears that the carrier and surface action forces could get to the Falklands no earlier than April 29. A fully integrated task force including the slower amphibious ships could not reach the Islands until May 5. However, a smaller strike force could bypass Ascension and reach the Falklands by as early as April 25, or 26. Thus far, we have no firm information that British ships other than the submarines have proceeded beyond Ascension. End summary.

3. Initially we assumed that the UK forces would make a high speed transit to the Falklands and get visible, if not fully effective, forces on station by April 21. It now appears that it could take as much as two and a half weeks from today to get the fully integrated task force on station. However, we still have no indication whether simultaneous arrival of the entire task force is a British prerequisite for initiation of hostilities. The British Navy may not wish to show their hand and may have in mind incremental use of their forces. They could attempt to preserve some element of surprise, and proceed at best speed with selective ships to the Falklands. If they did so, the first surface combatants could arrive on station by April 25 or 26 at the earliest. They could reach South Georgia one or two days sooner.

4. There may be both logistical and political reasons for the relatively slow advance of the British task force. The British may simply be attempting to orchestrate their arrival at Ascension to avoid overloading the limited facilities on the island. We believe it will take as much as two or three days for each group of ships to resupply and make any load adjustments necessary while at Ascension. The British

¹ Source: Department of State, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Miscellaneous Files, March 1981–February 1983, Lot 83D210, D. Gompert. Secret; Immediate; Nodis; Stadis.

also may be slowing to allow their reinforcements which include a container ship with additional Harriers to catch up, and to ensure that they have an effective supply train before engaging the Argentine forces. The rate of fuel consumption may also be a critical determinant in the speed of advance. However, there might also be a political element, i.e., to give diplomacy a chance to work against the backdrop of the growing military capability of the approaching British fleet.

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