

163. Memorandum of Conversation¹

Washington, April 22, 1982, 11:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m.

SUBJECT

Falkland Islands Dispute

PRINCIPALS

British Foreign Secretary Francis Pym
Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr.

OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Brian Fall, Mr. Pym's Private Secretary
Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders

¹ Source: Department of State, Executive Secretariat, S/S Special Handling Restrictions Memos 1979–1983, Lot 96D262, Super Sensitive April 1–30 1982. Secret; Sensitive. Drafted by Enders. The meeting took place at the Department of State.

Secretary Haig opened by describing the negotiating process in Buenos Aires, emphasizing its incoherence, the difficulty of finding a negotiating partner who could speak authoritatively, the relative weight of the Argentine Navy and Admiral Anaya in particular, and the role of the corps commanders. Returning here after three days of negotiation he had asked Foreign Minister Costa Mendez for a letter indicating that Argentines would accept the text established if it were acceptable to Britain, and been promised it, only to have Costa Mendez fail to deliver the letter at the airport, and indeed to advance the specious and unacceptable proposal that Argentina assume the governorship of the islands if the negotiations on their long-term status were to fail.²

The Secretary described Galtieri as a “Patton-type”, not particularly bright, and intensely worried about his survival. He is under conflicting pressures from the military (for giving too much in negotiations with us) and from a population that clearly doesn’t want war. The Secretary’s contacts with Argentines in church and in the street showed clearly that the mood has changed.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that if it had it was due to British pressure. Secretary Haig agreed, adding that there were no alternatives left to push on.

With regard to South Georgia, Foreign Secretary Pym said that it might be some time before military action occurred.³ Secretary Haig said that he had an observation to make which was not advice, since he did not want to pressure the British about its national interest. He had talked to the President,⁴ and if the British take military action in South Georgia we would have to issue a statement putting us some distance away from Britain but not in any decisive way. Obviously it would be best if the island could be recaptured without casualties, but the Argentine Marines had sustained substantial casualties in taking the island, and there could be little doubt but that they will resist. The Secretary said that the U.S. would put the number of Argentine personnel on the island at 40, much lower than the high, but not very credible, figures the Argentines are putting out. He added that it would not be the best timing for the action to occur while Pym was here or immediately thereafter, or while talks go on with Argentina. But if the island were retaken surgically, it probably would help build pressure for a solution.

² Haig is describing his April 19 meeting with Costa Méndez at the Buenos Aires airport (see footnote 2, Document 152). For the text of Costa Méndez’s proposal, see Document 159.

³ See Document 160.

⁴ See footnote 2, Document 155.

Speaking objectively, but with our deep sympathy for the British position, Secretary Haig said that Galtieri had only limited flexibility. Galtieri had insisted that with a reasonable assurance of sovereignty all the rest was negotiable, and there is a clear trade with this. We had responded we could not provide an assurance of any kind, and could not ask an ally to sacrifice its own sovereign interests. The Secretary concluded that Galtieri's life expectancy as President was very short, that Costa Mendez was not a valid interlocutor and thus that there was no point in having Costa Mendez sit down with Pym, as the former had proposed. The Secretary said that he saw no alternative but to return to Buenos Aires.

Foreign Secretary Pym said he was not terribly optimistic about the Secretary's mission. The British Government and people were genuinely and deeply grateful to him for the extraordinary effort he had made. Foreign Secretary Pym did not think there was any point in trying to produce a completely new proposal, nor did he see any change that could be made in the existing document that would bridge the gap.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that Prime Minister Thatcher had gone through the roof at the thought that confidential information on British military plans vis-a-vis South Georgia might be shared with the Argentinians.⁵ The weather was bad, and it was extremely unlikely that anything would happen for several days. He doubted that casualties could be avoided when action did occur, but thought that recapture of South Georgia from Argentina would be a dramatic way of keeping up the pressure. Foreign Secretary Pym thought the gap between the British position and the Buenos Aires text was enormous, particularly when it was so hard to tell whom one could deal with. If it were possible for the Secretary's mission to succeed, he would be all for it. But one must face the probable outcome. Clearly time is running out. The mood in Britain is calm and responsible. In their hearts the people don't want

⁵ In her memoirs, Thatcher wrote that the U.K. Government informed Haig through Henderson, April 21, "that a firm decision had been taken to recover South Georgia in the near future." "Mr. Haig," she recounted, "expressed himself surprised and concerned. He asked whether our decision was final: I confirmed that it was. We were informing, not consulting him. Later he told our ambassador that he thought he would have to give the Argentine Junta advance notice of our intended operation. We were appalled. Nico Henderson persuaded him to think better of it." (Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 204) No U.S. record of Haig's conversation with Henderson has been found. However, Henderson's transmitted reports of this meeting have been published online by the Thatcher Foundation. On April 22, in a meeting with Bosworth, Takacs expressed "apparent concern" that the "USG might have some information on a possible British attack against South Georgia." In response, Haig wrote to Costa Méndez, stating "we have no influence with the British" with regard to their military intentions. "Any decision they might take would be theirs alone, without consultation with us." (Telegram 109457 to Buenos Aires, April 23; Reagan Library, Executive Secretariat, NSC Country File, Latin America/Central, Argentina (04/20/1982-04/23/1982))

war but they understand what is at stake. Prime Minister Thatcher is resolute and not inclined towards further compromise. She feels fortified in this by her conversation with President Reagan April 17.⁶

Foreign Secretary Pym asked the Secretary what possibility of success he saw and what chance of success there is if he returns to Buenos Aires.

Secretary Haig said he was not optimistic and would have given up much earlier if that had been the criterion. He was only going on because of the historic consequence of failure. If there is war, Latin America will (regardless of the finer judgements of some of its leaders) line up against Britain. This would come to a head at the OAS meeting.⁷ There would be an opportunity for Soviet mischief, and some ramifications in Central America. More important is the potential impact in Britain. Nothing will come out of the Secretary's mission that will shake the relationship, but we are vitally interested in the long-term viability of the Thatcher Government. Things would go all right up to the point of military action and just beyond. Afterwards Labour and others would pull away.

Foreign Secretary Pym agreed that it could be a very long struggle. The pressure is not strong enough now to get results. More pressure is needed to make the negotiations succeed. It would be decisive if the U.S. came off the fence. Pym noted that the Government had defended Secretary Haig in Parliament against charges the U.S. was too even-handed. But reaction was growing. In his judgment, only U.S. economic or other pressure could make the shuttle work.

Secretary Haig said that there was also no question but that the U.S. would shift if talks collapsed. We had told that repeatedly to the Argentines, and we believe they do not question it. What they do question is whether Britain will actually go to war.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that time was critical and that everything is to be said for applying infinitely greater pressure now.

Secretary Haig said that he thought that the threat could be made even more vigorously and that Britain should not doubt on whose side we would come down. However, financial and trade measures would not have an immediate effect, indeed might take six months to act while in the meantime the whole international financial structure might be shaken as the Argentine crisis came on top of the Polish, Rumanian, and Mexican crises.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that such a crisis might bring Argentina to its senses.

⁶ See Document 144.

⁷ See Document 185.

Secretary Haig said that the U.S. must consider the consequences. There would be a north-south as well as an east-west crisis. If pressure is required maybe it would be better to use military pressure. That is the only thing that can bring home that the west is willing to fight. He noted that we have an exceptionally large fleet in the Caribbean.

Foreign Secretary Pym noted that military pressures would topple the government in Buenos Aires.

Secretary Haig said that sanctions would probably have an initial effect of annealing unity in Buenos Aires and making the government more intractable. That would leave Britain with the only alternative of blockading the islands as a means of long-term strangulation. The other alternative is a continuation of the talks. We are down now to a narrow margin of compromise, with peripheral shifts between the withdrawal, interim arrangements, and negotiations paragraphs likely to be decisive. He believed the key was the U.S. role. U.S. involvement was disadvantageous from our point of view as it would make us the focus of animosity of both governments but the U.S. involvement would provide the psychological equivalent of a guarantee, assuring Argentina that it would have a fair shot at influencing the outcome while reassuring Britain that there will be no precipitous action.

Secretary Haig noted the importance of the Falkland Islands company to the Argentines. Foreign Secretary Pym said that he was unaware that Britain had ever opposed share purchases by Argentina. On the other hand, he was worried that the Argentines would attempt to flood the islands with people. Secretary Haig said that we would not permit that.

Secretary Haig said that it would be better if the interim period were 18 months, and Foreign Secretary Pym agreed. Secretary Haig said that the U.S. could take on an active mediating role at the end of the year if the two countries had not negotiated an agreement prior to then.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that he thought that there were only a few days left before time ran out.

Secretary Haig said that the OAS meeting on April 26 presented a problem. The U.S. would argue that there is no legal basis for action when a Rio Treaty member uses force against an outside power, but the Latins would outvote us. One way to trump the OAS would be to go back to Buenos Aires on April 27. He recognized that there were only a few days left, since as soon as the British assembled its fleet, it would have to act, or we all lose credibility. Pym said that there was about a week more before that point was reached.

Foreign Secretary Pym expressed concern that the negotiations could drag on. Secretary Haig replied that a new trip to Buenos Aires would put the onus for failure on Argentina.

Secretary Haig then outlined the possibility of adding language on U.S. mediation/conciliation to the text. Foreign Secretary Pym asked whether that would make unnecessary retention of the tendentious language on negotiations in Paragraph 8. Secretary Haig replied that there was no way to get an agreement unless the language were retained.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that the principle of self-determination must not be put at risk, he was not at all sure that he could get through the House with the concept of a U.S.-sponsored "evolution" on the islands.

Secretary Haig said that he thought the withdrawal process would be readily resolvable once the rest of the agreement were reached, and Foreign Secretary Pym agreed.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that he considered the draft the British had forwarded to Washington the day before to be its bottom line.⁸ The Secretary's suggestions were below that. If they were retained, the Thatcher Government would fall. Secretary Haig said that it was inconceivable we would contribute to such a result.

Foreign Secretary Pym said that if a new trip to Buenos Aires were undertaken it would have to be the last bite, with the U.S. ready to back off thereafter.

Secretary Haig closed by reassuring Foreign Secretary Pym that the U.S. is not, and in the light of its public opinion, cannot be even-handed.

⁸ See Document 162.