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DIRECTORATE OF  
26 APR 1982

ARGENTINE MILITARY REACTION

1. I attach a copy of my paper on Argentine military reaction to British military operations in the South Atlantic which you called for as background for the Chequers discussions tomorrow.

24 April 1982

*J. King*  
DCDS(I)

Attachment:

Argentine Military Reaction to UK Military Operations(10 pages).

24 APR 1982

1 page only

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ARGENTINE MILITARY REACTION TO UK MILITARY OPERATIONS

1. UK military options in the South Atlantic are being reviewed at Cabinet level, and COS may wish to consider possible Argentine military reactions to those options. Consequently this paper deals with military judgements. But we also point up some other considerations which will need wider study.

AIM

2. The aim of this paper is to assess likely Argentine military reaction to British military operations in the South Atlantic.

ASSUMPTIONS

3. For this study, we assume that: the Argentine Junta cannot afford to compromise; the Junta will continue to seek wide international support, and their actions will be calculated to arouse sympathetic reactions; Argentina will not receive any military reinforcement and must confront the British Task Force with what she now has.

UK MILITARY ACTIONSSOUTH GEORGIA

4. We believe that the Argentines have only left a small force on South Georgia which they have made no attempt to reinforce. South Georgia is beyond the range of Argentine land based air power and their fleet remains close to the mainland. The Argentines have already speculated that a British re-occupation in the near future is likely. Thus the loss will not come as a surprise. The Galtieri Government will probably have assessed that they can withstand the internal repercussions which might follow. The re-possession of South Georgia will

firm the resolve of HMG and demonstrate that further British offensive action is likely. But it probably will not cause the Argentines immediately to initiate a military counter, such as an attack on the Task Force. The Argentines will not necessarily wish to foreclose on a diplomatic solution.

#### THE TOTAL EXCLUSION ZONE (TEZ)

5. Although it will have been anticipated, the declaration of the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) will probably be regarded by the Argentines as a major escalation. But the longer it is delayed the longer will they have to build up their stocks. Both in the interests of national prestige and to bolster the morale of the garrison, they will no doubt seek to break the blockade. In the first place they might well send in a merchant ship, perhaps under a neutral flag. If this fails they could try a civil aircraft. They might use the colours of a national airline such as that of Brazil, appreciating that this would present the most awkward case for the UK.

6. The Argentines will also look for any circumstances by which they can demonstrate that the UK's action contravenes international law and can be shown to breach humanitarian criteria. A civilian medical emergency needing treatment beyond the capability of the Island's limited hospital facilities might be an obvious choice, although in that case they could be expected by the international community to operate under the protection of the Red Cross.

## DESTRUCTION OF STANLEY AIRPORT

7. We have already identified (1) that the only sure way of imposing an effective air blockade is to neutralise Stanley airfield. It is an action which would give an unmistakable indication of HMG's determination. A precision attack would have a catastrophic effect on the air bridge, and it would finally deprive the Argentines of any opportunity to station aircraft at Stanley. It would probably destroy ground facilities, together with some helicopters and other parked aircraft. It would also have both an immediate and long term impact on Argentine morale. If the blockade is to be maintained we will have to frustrate Argentine attempts to repair the airfields by further bombing or by other means. We know that they have some engineer plant and repair material. But we cannot estimate how long repairs would take.

8. The Argentines might, as a counter, try to fly light aircraft at low level into the Island's grass strips and claim that Port Stanley airfield had already fulfilled its role. They might also resort to air dropping. These flights would be difficult for the Task Force totally to interdict.

9. The Argentines could be expected to extract as much propaganda value as possible from such an air attack by claiming that civilian assets had been destroyed. They would probably exploit the attack to provide the justification, both nationally

### Note:

1. DCDS(I)26, 21 April 1982.

and internationally, for a formal declaration of war (or something similar) against the UK. The implications of this are probably more diplomatic and economic than military. We examine them briefly later.

#### SPECIAL FORCES OPERATIONS

10. The initiation of Special Forces action would bring the Argentine forces to a high state of alert, which they would endeavour to maintain. A series of Special Forces attacks, mounted frequently but at irregular intervals and with precision, against the critical targets we have already identified (1) would pose severe problems to the garrison. A high level of local defence would have to be sustained with all the attendant effects of fatigue; troops would become jittery and morale would start to suffer; the physical damage to installations, stocks, communications, helicopters etc would degrade the defence. Their only recourse would be to draw in their perimeter as best they can, they will have to decide whether or not to abandon the airport. If sufficient helicopters survived they could probably attempt to mount modest search and destroy missions. Overall they would be intensely aware that this continuing aggressive harassment would increase the effects of the blockade.

#### MARITIME OPERATIONS

11. The Argentines have yet to challenge the Maritime Exclusion Zone, (MEZ). But they may now decide to do so, and if they do it could take three forms. First, to deploy their surface fleet

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into the TEZ with such air cover as can be provided. An attempt to call our bluff in this way would be a venture carrying high risk, given the SSN threat. The military gain would be small unless the Argentines were to send in a convoy in connection with the sortie. We consider this most unlikely.

12. Second, to use Naval Auxiliaries to break the blockade. But they know that we are prepared to treat Auxiliaries as naval ships. The former are of course more vulnerable than most naval units. However given a favourable combination of weather and operations elsewhere they might be prepared to try. There would be some propaganda value to the Argentines, if they were successful.

13. Third, the Argentines could try to run the blockade with mercantile vessels, on the assumption that they would be turned back rather than sunk. They might calculate that there is some chance of a blockade-runner getting through. The TEZ would have been shown to be ineffective. The ships cargo could add to the logistic stocks on the Island and perhaps most important it could be used as an accommodation ship in Stanley Harbour. If on the other hand, we stop the ship, the Argentines might try to claim that it was carrying a normal peaceable cargo to the Islands, mainly for the Islanders benefit, and that we had thwarted this humanitarian gesture. On balance, therefore, the Argentines have nothing to lose and at least something to gain by running the blockade with one or more mercantile ships. They will probably do so.

## AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT

14. This option carries the least risk of ambiguous interpretation. It is the declared policy of HMG to recover the Falkland Islands, by force if necessary. Amphibious assault is widely forecast internationally, and is accepted to be militarily almost inevitable. It would be difficult for the Argentines to portray it as anything other than the direct military action that we have threatened. Nor could they hope to ward it off by the kind of diplomatic play that might attend certain of the other military options. They would have no choice but to resist the amphibious assault by force.

15. Against a background that the Argentines probably assume that the Amphibious Force will not directly assault Port Stanley, they must be prepared for the UK to succeed in securing a bridgehead. They could lightly contest the landing but no more. In essence the theme of the Argentine defence plan might be to hold the Port Stanley complex in strength and to retain outposts on the outlying high ground for as long as possible. In response to pressure, they would have to pull the latter back into a closer perimeter where we could not, because of the presence of the remaining civilians, make maximum use of fire support. Although they may wish to regain or seize the initiative, the Argentines must appreciate that they have little chance of so doing. It is this factor which must already be preying on Argentine minds. They

could also have serious doubts about their ability to maintain morale if they were subjected to constant harrassment, from the air and on the ground.

16. Argentina would probably attempt to bolster the local defences by naval and air action. Despite the risks, they might launch possibly their surface fleet and probably their submarines against the Amphibious Force. They would strive to encounter it when it was at its most vulnerable. This attack would be coordinated with air strikes, the aim being to disrupt the landing operation. Principal targets would be the major assault ships and the carriers. The Argentines could also be expected to attempt to disrupt the attack possibly with naval gun fire and probably with close air support directed at our beachheads, which, would depend upon our ability to achieve tactical surprise. The Junta would recognise that at this stage their only hope was to stand and fight. To permit the UK to establish unopposed a secure bridgehead would effectively be an abdication of power.

17. However, once a UK bridgehead is established the Argentines might reckon they could out last us. They might take comfort from problems we face with our long L of C, and the need to keep the Task Force on station and with the demanding requirement of maintaining local air superiority. We can counter by continuing to deprive him of the airfield, by enforcing the TEZ and by hitting hard at the Garrison's defences. The latter achieved, not by deliberate assault but by wearing him down with a series of aggressive



, and outflanking him by exploiting the mobility of our helicopters. In this context the balance of advantage would tilt progressively in our favour.

#### NON-MILITARY INITIATIVES

18. In discussing, briefly, the non-military initiatives we can do no more, at this stage, than highlight some of the critical areas.

19. Political:

a. The Junta's ability to retain the support of the Argentine population will depend to a large extent on their ability to arouse nationalist sentiment and fervour. However, the Government is fundamentally unpopular, as was shown by the large demonstrations just before the invasion, and significant military reverses could endanger the position of the present Government. Any replacement Government would, however, be equally hard line and unlikely to accept the demands of the UK. In order to bolster morale any Argentine Government would be likely to declare a war zone, or even to declare war once it appreciated that a diplomatic solution was impossible. This point could well be reached with our destruction of Stanley Airfield.

b. At this stage the Junta would also be likely to take action against the British residents in Argentina. Property would be sequestered and the residents could physically be at risk.

Diplomatic. The Argentines will seek to gain international condemnation of the British use of force and, in particular, to exploit any action which can be shown as contrary to humanitarian principles. She is likely to gain increasing support once the first aggressive action is taken by the UK. The longer that military operations continue with the inevitable loss of life, the greater will be the international diplomatic pressure for a cease-fire.

21. Economic. The economic position of Argentina is already very difficult, and in the long term the consequences of our military action will exacerbate the situation. Immediately economic factors are, however, unlikely to have direct effect on Argentina's ability to wage war.

#### CONCLUSIONS

22. We conclude that:

- a. The repossession of South Georgia will probably not provoke an immediate military escalation by the Argentines.
- b. The announcement of the imposition of an Air Exclusion Zone might lead Argentina to attempt to circumvent the blockade, using means which offer the greatest propaganda potential.
- c. Special Forces activity on the Islands might not lead to an Argentine declaration of war (or some similar act) but that the bombing of Stanley airport would.

- d. An amphibious assault would lead to an all-out military confrontation.

It follows that the decision to bomb Stanley airport probably represents the point of critical decision.

23. We also conclude that:

- a. The constant harrassment of the Garrison, from the air and on the ground, will substantially enhance the effects of the TEZ.
- b. The later within "the window" that any amphibious assault is mounted the more vulnerable will the Argentines be.
- c. Provided a bridgehead is established within reasonable striking distance of Stanley and provided the Argentine mobility is degraded (by destroying his helicopters), we will be able to wear down their defence.

24. Finally we conclude that the Argentines must already appreciate that they face military defeat. They may seek a hook on which to hang a withdrawal. Indeed there are signs that they are already doing so.