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PUS

Sir I Sinclair

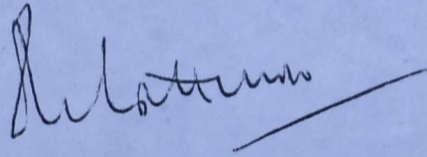
FALKLAND ISLANDS: POSSIBLE ATTACK ON THE ARGENTINE CARRIER

1. At the PUS's meeting this morning, there was some discussion about possible attacks on the Argentine aircraft carrier. I think this took place before you arrived, although I understand that the subject was also discussed at Chequers yesterday.
2. As you know, there is considerable interest on the part of the Chiefs of Staff, an interest which is shared I believe by the Prime Minister, in the possibility of an attack at some stage in eventual hostilities on the Argentine aircraft carrier. Air superiority in the Falkland Island zone is of course likely to be absolutely crucial to the outcome of a blockade. On the assumption that the Argentines can be prevented from making any use of Stanley airport, and given that, operating from the mainland, Argentine aircraft will find themselves pretty close to the limit of their range over the West Falklands, the role of the Argentine aircraft carrier is vital.
3. I understand that at Chequers yesterday there was some discussion of the possibility of issuing a warning to the Argentines that their aircraft carrier should stay well clear of the zone of operations. The Chiefs however object that one consequence of this might be to encourage the Argentines to withdraw the carrier close to the mainland or even to mainland ports, thus preserving the potential threat in the longer term.
4. The PUS therefore asked that we should give some consideration to possible justifications for mounting an attack on the carrier outside the MEZ. I would be grateful to have your advice on this.
5. There seem to me to be one or two important considerations which we might need to take into account. First, there is a situation in which the carrier is operating from a station which is sufficiently close to the MEZ (although outside it) to allow its aircraft to attack targets inside the MEZ. In this case I presume that one could argue that an attack on the carrier would be legitimate since it would be providing a platform from which the MEZ was threatened. But we need to be careful even in this instance. The carrier can carry on it the French-built Super Etendard, which has an operating radius of 450 statute miles and carries the Exocet air-to-surface missile which itself has, in this mode, a range of

/40 miles.

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40 miles. If therefore we are talking about an operating base threatening the MEZ from outside we need to take account of a distance which is greater than the distance between the Falkland Islands and the mainland. You may wish to consider what the implications would be, if we adopted this argument, for possible attacks on mainland bases. Second, there is the case of an attack on the aircraft carrier when it is quite clearly out of its own aircraft's range of the MEZ. Unlike mainland bases, the aircraft carrier is mobile and its very mobility would make it a constant potential threat at pretty short notice to targets inside the MEZ. Third, there is the question of whether we could produce any justification for destroying the aircraft carrier in an Argentine mainland port. Although this might be seen as a substantial measure of escalation, one could presumably argue the case on the grounds of the carrier's mobility. Furthermore, an attack on the ship in harbour might (subject to military advice) be one which involved significant damage to the vessel but very limited casualties. This would of course not be the case if the carrier was sunk on the high seas by torpedo.



D H Gillmore

26 April 1982

cc:

PS/PUS

→ Mr Wright
Mr Weston

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