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COS(Misc) 170/742/1

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MILITARY THREAT POSED TO BRITISH FORCES BY THE
ARGENTINE AIRCRAFT CARRIER "25 OF MAY"

In accordance with the instructions (1) of the Chiefs of Staff, the attached draft OD(SA) paper will be tabled for their consideration at their meeting at 10.30 am on Thursday 29 April 1982.

Attachment:

Draft OD(SA) Paper - Military Threat Posed by the Aircraft Carrier "25 OF MAY" (9 pages).

Note:

- 1. COS 33rd Meeting/82, Item 5.

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28 April 1982

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Secretary
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DRAFT OD(SA) PAPER ON ARGENTINE AIRCRAFT CARRIER

As agreed at this morning's COS meeting I attach a draft paper prepared jointly by the Navy Department and DS11 and approved by CNS.

R. T. Brown
Secretary/CNS
28 April 1982

The Threat

2. Argentina has one old aircraft carrier. However, she can carry 7 to 9 A4 Skyhawk and, possibly, up to 9 Super Etendard aircraft. Both types of aircraft are capable of mounting air-to-surface and air-to-air attacks at a distance of about 400 miles from the carrier. The 6 Tracker aircraft can carry out radar surveillance operations up to 500 miles from the carrier, giving her the capability to direct other air and naval units into attack positions as well as using her own offensive aircraft. Her own helicopters would provide limited ASW capability. The Argentines are thus able to threaten our forces from the air at a great distance from the Argentine mainland. We would expect the carrier to be escorted by 2 or 3 other vessels with a balanced ship-borne

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DRAFT OD(SA) PAPER

Military Threat Posed to British
Forces by the Argentine Aircraft
Carrier "25th of May"

Note by MOD

1. This paper identifies the military threat posed to our forces in the South Atlantic by the Argentine aircraft carrier "25th of May", formulates options for eliminating that threat, and makes recommendations.

The Threat

2. Argentina has one old aircraft carrier. However, she can carry 7 to 9 A4 Skyhawk and, possibly, up to 5 Super Etendard aircraft. Both types of aircraft are capable of mounting air-to-surface and air-to-air attacks at a distance of about 400 miles from the carrier. The 6 Tracker aircraft can carry out radar surveillance operations up to 500 miles from the carrier, giving her the capability to direct other air and naval units into attack positions as well as using her own offensive aircraft. Her own helicopters would provide limited ASW capability. The Argentines are thus able to threaten our forces from the air at a great distance from the Argentine mainland. We would expect the carrier to be escorted by 2 or 3 other vessels with a balanced ship-borne

surface-to-air and surface-to-surface capability.

What is Threatened

3. The threat is posed to:

- a. The main amphibious Task Force on passage from Ascension Island, which will be only lightly escorted by RN warships and RAF aircraft;
- b. Our forces engaged in enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ);
- c. Vessels in the continuing re-supply and reinforcement chain from Ascension Island;
- d. Aircraft undertaking maritime and other operations south of Ascension Island.

Capability to Defeat the Threat

4. Argentine carrier-launched aircraft engaging our forces can be countered by our own aircraft, by anti-aircraft missiles and by neutralising the carrier. The Sea Harriers will be stretched to cope with land based Argentine aircraft which challenge the TEZ and may be near the end of their radius of action. The additional threat from carrier based aircraft launched outside but close to the TEZ would further extend air resources, leaving little

offensive effort available for other priority targets. Without air cover from the Harriers, our ships would look to their anti-aircraft missiles for air defence and against attacks on the scale which could be launched from "25th of May" this could be inadequate, particularly on the re-supply/reinforcement route from Ascension. The best defence, therefore, would be to neutralise the carrier itself.

Options

5. There would seem to be broadly 4 options for achieving this objective:

- A. To sink the carrier as soon as possible wherever she is on the high seas. Action against the carrier could be taken by our surface ships, Harriers or submarines. Action would best be taken without warning but it could be contingent on any attack on our forces regardless of the carrier's involvement. Under this option, the carrier would be removed before it had threatened our forces, and the threat would be disposed of permanently. This option would, therefore, be the safest and most economical from a military point of view. It might not be attractive in legal or political terms.

B. To induce the "25th of May" to return to port and stay there. We would issue a warning to the Argentine to withdraw the "25th of May" to port within 48 hours. After that time, if she remained at sea,

or put to sea again, she would be liable to attack wherever encountered by our forces. Militarily, this option is less attractive than A. because we could not be sure of enforcing it, and even if we did, the carrier would remain a potential threat. Our action might be difficult to justify in legal or political terms.

- C. To induce the "25th of May" to stay within the Argentine internationally recognised territorial waters of 12 nm off-shore, and north of 43° S. This would be implemented similarly to option B. It might be somewhat easier to enforce, but the carrier would remain a potential threat. This option would be easier to explain politically than A. or B. (although Article 51 of the UN Charter might not provide sufficient legal basis).

- D. To confine the "25th of May" within an area bounded by the parallel 43° S and the rhumb-line connecting the positions 43° S 56° W and 23° S 35° W. This boundary would confine the carrier to an area from which it could not mount attacks against either the amphibious and other shipping on passage from Ascension or our forces enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ). In one

respect, this regime could be more difficult to enforce than options B. or C. since it would depend upon timely and accurate intelligence about the carrier's movements. Against that, the boundary is well off-shore and our forces would be less inhibited by shore-based aircraft or the need to operate in shallow water. This regime would be introduced by a warning to the Argentine navy of our intentions, and of the action liable to be taken against "25th of May" if she moved outside the boundary. This action could be more easily defended in relation to Article 51 of the UN Charter than options A., B. and C., and presentationally it would have the advantage of similarity with the MEZ and now TEZ which we have imposed around the Falkland Islands.

Implementation

6. Which ever option is preferred, it would be for the Task Group Commander to decide how to enforce it. He has at his disposal surface ships, Harriers or SSNs.

- a. Destroyers and Frigates would attack the "25th of May" with surface-to-surface missiles. To do so, they would need to approach the carrier in the face of attack from her aircraft and her surface

escorts armed with EXOCET missiles. It would be necessary to divert substantial forces from the enforcement of the TEZ.

- b. Harriers would attack with 1,000 lb bombs. In the numbers likely to be available, they could be vulnerable both to missile defence and the carrier's own aircraft. They too would be diverted from enforcing the TEZ.
- c. SSNs would attack with mark 8 torpedoes. A SSN could be instructed to shadow the carrier at all times. This could be difficult to achieve if the "25th of May" was operating in water less than 35 fathoms as she has been recently. The shadowing task can be further complicated by the use of speed by the carrier and aggressive escorting.

On balance, a SSN would give the greatest certainty of success with the least prejudice to other operations. Following a torpedo attack from a SSN, the "25th of May" would be disabled. It is possible that she might sink quickly, but this is unlikely given good damage control practices. An attack by gunfire, missiles or bombs would also result in severe damage to the carrier or loss of life. If the carrier did sink, it is probable that a large proportion of her crew numbering about 1,000 would have time to abandon ship with life rafts. Her escorting vessels should be able to pick up survivors.

Conclusions

7. The foregoing makes clear that on strictly military grounds option A. offers the most economic and certain prospect of neutralising the threat to our forces from the "25th of May". We recognise, however, that the legal basis for such action could be difficult to establish, and that the political reaction to it could be damaging. Options B. and C. are less attractive militarily, although their legal basis and their public presentation could be easier to sustain. In both cases, Argentina is likely to object strongly and unlikely to concur. Option D. offers the prospect of neutralising the threat from "25th of May" at the moment it becomes an immediate threat, at the same time as it would allow the Argentine carrier freedom within a sizeable operational area.

Malvinas be seized. Their professional honour demands that their ships stay at sea - the carrier above all. A return to harbour would be tantamount to defeat. They would lose face with the other 2 services, within the junta, with the people and internationally. They would not be prepared to accept the limitation. The carrier would probably remain at sea.

3. To Remain Inside a 12 Mile Limit Argentina does not recognise a 12 mile limit. The implied suggestion that it represents territorial waters would be related not only by Argentina but also by most other South American states, including probably Chile. Argentina's stance in the 0-12 zone is

ASSESSMENT OF ARGENTINIAN REACTIONS TO RESTRICTIONS
ON THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER "25TH OF MAY"

1. In this Annex, we aim to assess Argentine reactions to the three options posed in the paper, namely for the carrier "25th of May":

- a. To return to harbour and remain there;
- b. To remain inside a 12 mile limit;
- c. To remain inside a designated boundary.

2. To Return to Harbour The Argentine navy is the most hawkish of the Armed Services. They have consistently taken the lead in urging that the Malvinas be seized. Their professional honour demands that their ships stay at sea - the carrier above all. A return to harbour would be tantamount to defeat. They would lose face; with the other 2 services, within the junta, with the people and internationally. They would not be prepared to accept the limitation. The carrier would probably remain at sea.

3. To Remain Inside a 12 Mile Limit Argentina does not recognise a 12 mile limit. The implied suggestion that it represents territorial waters would be refuted not only by Argentina but also by most other South American states, including probably Chile. Argentina's stance in the OAS would be

strengthened. The limitation also carries a taint of defeat. It too would probably be rejected.

4. To Remain Inside a Designated Boundary If the carrier was to remain within the boundary, the Argentines might try to claim that they were operating aggressively in a preferred area, that they retained their freedom of action, and that they were conforming to the recent pattern of deployment. A timely breakdown could be used as a pretext to withdraw into harbour. Honour would be satisfied. The Argentines might indeed covertly welcome the limitation since it would remove the current perceived threat from our SSNs. They would probably accept, under a propaganda umbrella of wishing to de-escalate the situation.

5. In sum, the Argentines would be most unlikely to accept the first two limitations. However, maybe this is what we would wish since both would provide a combination of warning and pretext to sink? But they might well respect the boundary since this option coincides with many of their own best interests.