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NB. PAGES 6-9
(ANNEXES) WERE
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6 September 2002

Sir David,

IRAQ: MILITARY PLANNING

You requested an update on US military planning for action against Iraq and the factors informing decisions on any UK military contribution. This is a necessarily provisional assessment, partly because of the evolving nature of the US plan itself:

— and we have yet to conduct detailed joint planning with the US — before we can fully assess our ability to generate military capability within the likely time available. We will also need to approach industry for force preparation reasons.

US Military Planning

Sir David Manning KCMG
10 Downing Street

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Possible UK contributions

We are working on three positive options, ranging from "minimum" to "maximum" effort. In each case, we would envisage the additional inclusion of a Special Forces . The envisaged composition of each option is shown in the tables attached at Annex, but the key features are summarised below:

Package 1 – Existing Forces

This uses existing forces and support already deployed in theatre and bases in the UK and on British territory. We would expect to have aircraft in Turkey and the Gulf and 7 ships on the Armilla patrol, including TLAM . Additionally, the US want to use

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airbases at Fairford in the UK, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. All of these assets have the advantage of being available at very short notice with little or no public visibility of UK preparation for conflict. They also amount to a substantial contribution, albeit one which would have to be integrated into US operations. It would involve around 3000 regular Service personnel.

Package 2 – Air and Maritime Forces

This adds substantial maritime and air capability to package 1 and represents the maximum possible military contribution short of committing substantial numbers of ground troops. It would include a Carrier Group, the Amphibious Ready Group plus additional submarines, escorts, mine counter-measure vessels and support ships, amounting to about [REDACTED] naval units overall. On the air side, this could include additional strike, reconnaissance, surveillance, airborne early warning and support aircraft – amounting to about [REDACTED] aircraft overall – as well as airfield defences. A package of this size and scale would inevitably take time to generate but, assuming overflight and basing clearances for aircraft as well as passage of the Suez canal for ships (where necessary), all assets could be in theatre within about [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] of a decision to deploy. The total package would involve up to 13000 Service personnel. At least two months before the beginning of offensive action (ie in early November for a January start), we would need to commence call-out of up to 2000 reservist personnel. Some Urgent Operational Requirement (UORs) would also need to be raised at additional cost to the Reserve. Commitments on this scale would have a significant impact on both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force's ability to conduct future operations, effectively ruling out further medium scale naval and air deployments for several months after operations against Iraq had completed. This in part would be exacerbated if Operation FRESCO were running in parallel.

Additionally, we are examining whether a Royal Marine Commando Group could form part of Package 2.

Package 3 – Air, Maritime and Land Forces

This option includes substantial numbers of ground troops in addition to the maritime and air forces in Package 2. Our letter of 28 August warned that, once started, Operation FRESCO would limit our ability to offer ground forces. For timescale and FRESCO reasons, we are no longer able to offer a fully-capable division. Indeed, even were FRESCO to end soon, we could not provide a capable self-standing division within US timescales. There would simply not be enough time

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to carry out the preparations we would need to make. We would not have enough time to engage industry in order to improve sustainability (ammunition, etc) and implement UORs to optimise forces for the theatre and for interoperability with the US.

If we were to make a ground force contribution, the Chiefs are considering what the maximum effort could be, in this case through offering components into a larger (US-led) coalition Northern Force which could conceivably provide a vehicle for involving forces from other nations too. Were we to throw in everything we are likely to have, the UK could potentially generate up to a divisional headquarters, an armoured brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade and a logistic brigade. Whether all these capabilities could be offered in parallel and within the right timescales still needs to be confirmed by further detailed staff work. The Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters (for which the UK is the framework nation) could be also be offered, but only with NATO agreement (which cannot be assured). If Operation FRESCO ended quickly, these elements might be increased.

A contribution along these lines would offer significant capability to a US-led Northern Force, although it would not be fully suitable for involvement in decisive war-fighting operations. Were such an option to be pursued, we would need to take some decisions. In particular, a decision would be needed by to switch around some units currently assigned to FRESCO training to prepare for Package 3. This would also involve other units, currently on 6 month operational tours, having to continue for 12 months. Another publicly visible signal would include the immediate call out of some hundreds of key reservist personnel. This could eventually build up to a compulsory call out of some 10,000 reservists.

A UK decision to commit all these elements (some 40,000 personnel of whom some two-thirds are in support roles) would have wide ranging downstream consequences for our ability to respond to possible future crises elsewhere: it would be many months before we could carry out anything other than small-scale operations. These are strong arguments against betting the whole store in this way on one operation. Costs to the Reserve would also be high. However, if we do decide to offer a ground force contribution, we judge that a smaller brigade-level package (around 20,000) would have only marginal military value to the US, although its political benefit in terms of visible burdensharing could still make it relevant.

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Against this background, the Defence Secretary believes that we should continue to be cautious in discussing with the US the scale of UK's ability to contribute military capability. Whereas the predominantly air and maritime packages can be made available relatively with a level of confidence, Operation FRESCO places a considerable burden on our forces, particularly the Army, where it seriously limits our ability to offer ground troops.

Finally, you will wish to bear in mind that, if the US military preparations continue at their current pace, we will face some early tough decisions within two weeks of your return from Camp David.

I am copying this letter to Simon McDonald (FCO) and to Ian Fletcher and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

*Yours
Peter*

P D WATKINS
Private Secretary

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