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CABINET

USE OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND FOR  
UNITED STATES NUCLEAR TESTS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

The United States Government have not yet decided to carry out atmospheric tests. They have decided to go ahead at once with the preparations but they are not willing to use Eniwetok or Bikini, as they have done in the past, on the grounds that these are United Nations Trusteeship territories. The United States Ambassador has therefore formally requested the use of facilities, which the Americans would construct and pay for, on Christmas Island. I have undertaken to give an early reply. The Americans would like a combined United States / United Kingdom reconnaissance team to go to Christmas Island immediately and they would like to start the construction work about two weeks later. This work might last about four months. The tests themselves, of which 20 to 30 are contemplated, would then be spread over a period of another three to four months.

2. Technical Points

The following technical points are relevant:

- (a) All the tests contemplated would be in the atmosphere, though one or two might be carried out at heights of 150,000 to 300,000 feet. Some would be at sea level. Probably all the tests would be detected by other countries.
- (b) While the number of tests is large, the Americans tell us that the total yield will be not more than ten megatons (roughly a tenth of the yield so far of the current Russian series) and that fall-out should correspondingly amount to no more than 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the fall-out from the Russian tests.
- (c) The Americans have explained that testing is necessary mainly to improve yield to weight ratio, in order to accommodate protection devices and to develop counter-measures and even counter counter-measures, which are now becoming technically feasible.

3. General Points

- (a) The Americans appear to contemplate that other series of tests might follow on an annual basis (but presumably only if no agreement on a nuclear tests treaty is reached). They are willing to give us full information derived from the tests.

(b) Mr. Khrushchev has stated that if the Americans now test in the atmosphere the Russians will continue to do so. He may, of course, do so anyway.

(c) Australia and New Zealand will have a special interest because the tests will be in the Southern hemisphere.

4. Advantages of agreeing to the United States proposal

We fully supported the American decision in September to resume testing, and we have now said that, if we are convinced that a particular atmospheric test is necessary in order to maintain the balance of the deterrent and to preserve freedom in the world, we would be bound either to co-operate in or support its conduct. The Americans are in a real difficulty over testing grounds and we are in a position to give or withhold something that they badly need. We should therefore be able to induce the Americans to adopt a policy of full collaboration over testing. We should also be able to take advantage in other contexts of the political good-will earned by acceding to their request.

5. Disadvantages

By acceding to the American request we expose ourselves to serious criticism. Once construction work is started at Christmas Island, this will soon become public knowledge. For the following three to four months, and thereafter during a similar period while tests are carried out, we shall be under pressure to call a halt to the programme. This will come not only from uncommitted countries and the United Nations but also from India and probably, Canada, and other Commonwealth countries, as well as Japan. There will no doubt be strong protests in the United Kingdom, where both our own statements in Parliament and the recent statement of President Kennedy have been widely regarded as meaning that if any atmospheric tests take place the number will be very small.

6. Conclusions

From the Foreign Office and defence point of view the balance of advantage lies in acceding to the American request, but only on very strict and precise conditions, which we can justify to them on the grounds of the severe criticism to which we shall be subjected. We must be satisfied that tests should be carried out only on the strictest criteria of military necessity; and we can only be satisfied about this on the basis of full scientific information (including design information) about the devices to be tested. These conditions should be applied to each individual test. We must also have such information about testing arrangements as we need to satisfy ourselves on the health and safety aspects. In particular, we require more information about any tests that might contaminate Christmas Island or the adjacent seas.

7. In the meantime, I recommend that:-

(a) Officials should urgently study what further conditions we may want to impose and how our conditions should be formulated for presentation to the Americans.

(b) When we are ready to inform the Americans that we agree in principle to their request and to explain our conditions, we should also make it clear that we must discuss with them how their tests programme should best be presented in order to mitigate the severe criticism likely to arise.

H.

Foreign Office, S. W. 1.

10th November, 1961