

C(74) 131

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CABINET

THE SIMONSTOWN AGREEMENTS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Defence

1. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary in his memorandum C(74) 119 proposed that I should give my views on the military consequences of closing Simonstown and the alternative facilities that would be required. In the light of the Cabinet's discussion on Thursday, 31 October (CC(74) 42nd Conclusions), I am circulating this note for the information of my Cabinet colleagues and as background to our further deliberations.

THE AGREEMENTS

2. The Simonstown Agreements provide for:

a. The continued use by the Royal Navy in peace and war of the Naval Base at Simonstown. The facilities include berthing, maintenance, docking, fuel and access to naval communications. The facilities could be used in a war not involving South Africa only by mutual agreement.

b. Co-operation in the defence of sea routes around Southern Africa. Commander-in-Chief Fleet is responsible for joint maritime war planning and for the organisation and conduct of combined training in peacetime. In war he is responsible for the conduct of maritime operations and has operational command of all forces assigned to the area by Britain and South Africa.

CURRENT USE BY ROYAL NAVY

3. In peacetime the Agreements enable us - at no cost to ourselves - to deploy ships or groups of ships in the South Atlantic and Eastwards of the Cape with a minimum of afloat support.

4. They provide us with our only docking and maintenance facilities between Gibraltar and Singapore - a distance of 10,400 nautical miles via the Cape - and with one of the very few ports around the world where nuclear-powered submarines are received.

5. South African ports also provide rest and recreation facilities for the crews of our ships - especially those engaged on the Beira patrol by means of which we fulfil our United Nations responsibility in relation to Rhodesia - of a kind which are not available elsewhere in the area.

6. Diego Garcia is not a substitute for Simonstown, nor are Black African ports, such as Mombasa, even if we could rely upon their use indefinitely.

7. Since February 1974 at least six Royal Navy ships have used shore facilities at Simonstown for necessary repairs which could not have been done elsewhere in the area.

STRATEGIC FACTORS

8. Unlike Western Europe the Soviet Union has no substantial shipping or vital trading interests to protect in the Indian Ocean.

9. Nevertheless Soviet influence in the area is growing. In 1970 there was an average of only 9 Soviet naval units in the Indian Ocean; their average deployment in 1974 was 30 ships.

10. The Soviet Navy has also established operating facilities at Berbera in Somalia and at Aden. Their ability to increase their forces substantially has also been demonstrated and the reopening of the Suez Canal will add flexibility to their deployments.

11. The possible need for British participation in maritime operations in the focal area of the Cape arises from the need to preserve an evident capability, in the face of the Soviet threat, to assist in safeguarding supplies to this country and to our European allies in tension or war. For example, over 1000 merchant ships on average pass the Cape each month, of which about half are tankers. Of these some 180 and 90 respectively are United Kingdom Flag ships.

12. Even after North Sea oil is being fully exploited, Western Europe will still be dependent for substantial crude supplies coming round the Cape in tankers too large to transit the Suez Canal.

13. Against this background the value of the Simonstown arrangements is two-fold:

- a. The guaranteed availability of good base facilities, including a dry dock, greatly facilitates the operation of British and in wartime Allied warships East of the Cape. They require less elaborate afloat support and there is less likelihood, should some breakdown occur, of embarrassing difficulty in dealing with it.

b. More importantly, they offer the only means by which the West can realistically hope to safeguard shipping routes around Southern Africa. Without them it would not be possible for us to play our part in mounting a credible defence of shipping in the area and this fact would be recognised by friend and foe alike.

14. The Agreements envisage the defence of shipping as comprising: firstly, the provision of communications, command and control, base, bunkering and repair facilities for the Royal Navy (and other Allied maritime forces) operating in the area; secondly, the maintenance of the efficiency of the South African Navy so that it could work effectively with the Royal Navy; and, thirdly, co-operation with Allied and friendly forces.

15. We must expect opposition to termination of the Agreements from the major British shipping interests. The National Union of Seamen in a letter to "The Times" published on 7 November has already expressed concern at the possibility that the Simonstown facilities should be denied to us.

MILITARY CONSEQUENCES OF ABROGATION

16. Termination of the Agreements would relieve the South Africans of their obligation to maintain up to date facilities for our warships at Simonstown. It would also lessen the importance which they attach to the South African Navy and we would expect a diversion of their resources to other military purposes.

17. In consequence the entire arrangements for the defence of Allied shipping on the Cape routes, including our national responsibility for the Naval Control of Merchant Shipping (NCS) in an emergency, could be undermined.

18. These arrangements are a significant feature of NATO's and SACLANT's plans for the defence of shipping outside the existing NATO boundaries. NATO's requirement for an NCS organisation outside the NATO area was established in 1959 and in 1962 Britain was designated the Co-ordinating Nation in the sea areas around the Southern African Continent.

19. Termination would not, however, prevent us from deploying ships into the Indian Ocean; though this would become less convenient and more expensive.

WIDER CONSIDERATIONS

20. The significance of these arrangements in the light of the Defence Review is now to be discussed with our Allies.

21. Although the Agreements bring us political embarrassment in some quarters, they also confer some standing upon us in the eyes of our Allies, especially the Americans who look to us to share some of the burden which they carry in the Indian Ocean; and, I believe, in the eyes of the Shah, who is also concerned at the build-up of Soviet maritime strength in the area and whose Navy makes use of the Simonstown facilities.

22. The value of these Agreements, and our relations with South Africa as a whole, must also be viewed against the background of these wider considerations, and of their possible value in the longer term future.

R M

Ministry of Defence

8 November 1974

