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OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

21 September 1967

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Aldabra

PLACE: Ministry of Defence, London, 19 September 1967

US

Mr. Jeffrey Kitchen,
Foreign Service Reserve Officer

Mr. R. I. Spiers, Counselor,
Politico-Military Affairs,
American Embassy, London

Colonel H. Lindjord
Director Policy Planning,
OSD(ISA)

Colonel J. D. Peters,
Director Engineering Section,
Headquarters, USAF

Colonel E. A. Munns,
Engineer, 3d Air Force

Colonel J. J. Freda,
Chief, US Element,
US/UK Planning Group

UK

Mr. G. Leitch,
Deputy Under Secretary (Policy),
Ministry of Defence

Mr. T. A. G. Charlton,
Assistant Under Secretary,
Air Staff

Mr. E. Moss,
Head Defence Secretariat 18

Mr. R. A. Sykes,
Foreign Office

Air Commodore C. M. Clementi,
Director Air Plans, Ministry
of Defence

Mr. A. Brooke-Turner,
Foreign Office

Mr. T. Whitwell,
Commonwealth Office

Mr. C. A. Seller,
Commonwealth Office

Mr. C. H. Heim,
Defence Secretariat 11

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In opening the meeting, Mr. Leitch said he welcomed the opportunity to exchange views on Aldabra and related problems. Mr. Kitchen explained that the U.S. Government has a potentially difficult tactical problem with Congress in securing funding approval for the Aldabra project. He said this difficulty stems in part from growing U.S. domestic concern over Vietnam and the extent of U.S. commitments generally, and that the problem is intensified by the reaction of naturalists in the U.S. (including the National Academy of Science and the Smithsonian Institution) to what they regard as an invasion of a unique ecological preserve. Mr. Kitchen emphasized that U.S. interest in a military facility in the Western Indian Ocean has not diminished in any way, but we are seriously concerned over the problem of avoiding difficulties in getting a Congressional appropriation. Accordingly, before Mr. McNamara replies to Mr. Healey's letter of August 16, we believe it would be useful to have a frank discussion covering these points:

1. How does the U.K. describe its strategic requirements for a facility on Aldabra?
2. How does the U.K. Government deal with the scientific objections to the project?
3. How can we best work out a combined tactical approach to achieve our mutual objective of establishing such a facility?

Mr. Kitchen noted that our FDL project may have suffered in Congress from inadequate preparation, and we are anxious to take the necessary steps to prevent an unfavorable Congressional reaction to our joint project for a facility in the Western Indian Ocean.

Mr. Kitchen pointed out that we have received substantial correspondence from the public in the United States expressing concern over the threat to the wildlife on Aldabra, and it is entirely possible that some members of Congress who are really opposed to any expansion of U.S. commitments will seize upon the "protection of wildlife" issue as a means of blocking the Aldabra project. Accordingly, Mr. Kitchen suggested we explore the questions of why Aldabra is the right choice, how to deal with the naturalists' concerns, and finally whether in fact Farquhar has been given adequate consideration as an alternative. He pointed out that our interest is in being able to defend effectively before Congress the position on which we finally agree.

Mr. Leitch reviewed the U.K. strategic considerations that point to the choice of Aldabra. He said Aldabra has relevance in several contexts, in providing added military flexibility, and cited its role in connection with the Far East, the Persian Gulf and East Africa.

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As regards the Far East, he noted that the U.K. now has two routes open: the CENTO route, which might be denied under some circumstances, and the "Westabout" route, which involves no political problems but poses some traffic problems and in any case is significantly longer and more expensive.

Mr. Sykes pointed out that U.K. planning assumes that it would not normally be necessary to fly around the Cape of Good Hope, because in most foreseeable contingencies, either "Black Africa" or "White Africa" would be willing to let British planes fly over. He pointed out that from the mid-1970's, the RAF will assume the shipping protection role in the Indian Ocean as the carriers phase out, and this will give Aldabra increased military importance.

Mr. Leitch noted that we must distinguish between our true strategic rationale for Aldabra and the explanations we make publicly. For example, he suggested that as regards operations in Africa, our public statements should deal with this only in a hypothetical UN context. He asked for an exposition of U.S. views on strategic considerations affecting Aldabra.

Mr. Kitchen said that in general the U.S. concept envisaged a facility in the Aldabra area as providing a secondary logistic staging capability. (He noted in passing that the U.S. hopes to proceed with a facility on Diego Garcia, but that this would be supplementary to, and in no way a substitute for, Aldabra.) He pointed out that we expect that we will have to answer questions as to why Farquhar is not as good as Aldabra.

Colonel Freda confirmed that the U.S. views a site in the Aldabra area mainly as a staging facility and logistic back-up base. The U.S. regards this as secondary to whatever we can continue to use on the mainland in the Middle East, and we would regard it as useful inter alia in evacuation operations.

Air Commodore Clementi noted that in normal peacetime conditions the military presence in Aldabra would be very small; it would be designed primarily to keep the base operational for contingency situations. He estimated that there would be about 440 military personnel (of which some 400 would be British) and about 200 locally engaged civilians as the basic complement. Colonel Freda indicated that U.S. planning envisages as the maximum requirement a staging capability to handle 9,500 military personnel at one time. Colonel Munns pointed out that in an operational situation, the 400 plus basic complement would be augmented by 1,200 to 1,500 additional people so that the maximum population on the island during operations might run to 12,000 or 13,000. (Air Commodore Clementi noted that British planning assumes that U.S. and U.K. operational requirements on Aldabra would never "peak" at the same time.)

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There was a brief discussion on the planned composition of the permanent cadre. It was agreed that it would be predominantly British, but that the details of this composition would be a matter for U.S.-U.K. negotiations.

Mr. Leitch then turned to a discussion of alternative sites, which he identified as Farquhar, Assumption, and Cosmoledos. Air Commodore Clementi recalled that there had been a joint U.S.-U.K. survey of Farquhar in 1964. He noted that at that time the U.S. was mainly interested in fleet anchorages, and that the U.K. at that stage thought it possible that Farquhar might be less expensive to develop than Aldabra. He said the survey in 1964 showed that the length of the runway on Farquhar could be only 8,200 feet, with an overrun of 1,000 feet at each end. He pointed out that this would be significantly less than the minimum of 12,000 feet required for U.S. KC-135 operations. Thus, to get a 12,000 foot runway it would be necessary to build causeways out in deep water which would be very expensive. He added that no precise cost estimates for such causeways have been developed. He pointed out that Farquhar also has inadequate space to provide, in addition to a runway, the taxi and parking strips needed to handle the approximately 200 aircraft that might need to be deployed on the island in an emergency. He pointed out also that "domestic facilities" would need to be placed on a separate island from the airstrip because of lack of space, and this would be inconvenient operationally. He added that the U.S. concluded in 1964 that the island was too small to handle both the receiver and transmitter facilities required for communications. He said all these points reinforced the U.K.'s basic operational objections, which the U.K. believes remain valid today. The primary operational concerns are these:

1. In flying around the Cape, the U.K. figures the distance to Farquhar is 150 miles further than to Aldabra, and with the VC-10 aircraft, this cuts the payload by 20%.
2. In flying across Africa, Farquhar is 300 miles farther than Aldabra, with a commensurate reduction in payload.
3. In considering intervention operations in East Africa, Farquhar would add 600 miles to the flying distance compared to Aldabra. (As regards the protection of shipping mission, Farquhar would be as good as Aldabra and perhaps a little better.)

For the above reasons, the U.K. Government ruled out Farquhar operationally, and has not considered it necessary to proceed further with surveys of Farquhar.

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There was a brief discussion of two other possible alternatives, Wizard Island in the Cosmoledos Group, and Assumption Island, which is just 20 miles from Aldabra. Both were ruled out primarily on the grounds of their small size; also Assumption, at least, is not part of the BIOT.

It was agreed that U.S. technical officers, Colonel Peters and Colonel Munns, should meet with British counterparts during the afternoon of 19 September to examine the technical factors applying to alternatives in greater detail. It was also agreed that the British should furnish to the U.S. within the next 10 days or two weeks a summary of the argumentation the British have developed concerning the alternatives and concerning the scientific problems.

Mr. Kitchen suggested that we discuss the naturalist problem in more detail. Mr. Leitch expressed the view that the British have dealt with this problem to a substantial extent. He said official British views on the unacceptability of the alternative sites have been made available to the British scientists, and he believes that British scientists publicly accept the decision to proceed with Aldabra. He said the British Government has tried to put the problem to the scientists in the context of how the military and the scientists can live together in developing Aldabra. ?

Mr. Sykes said the scientists make two basic points: first, that Aldabra is ecologically unique, and that any intrusion there is bad; and second that there is unique birdlife on Aldabra that must be given specific protection. Air Commodore Clementi said much of the scientific concern arises from lack of knowledge of what the U.K. plans to do on Aldabra; he pointed out that they are planning a minor base using only a small part of the island and that special steps were being taken to respond to concerns regarding the wildlife. Mr. Kitchen said we need to be able to describe accurately what specific conservation measures can be taken if a base is built.

Mr. Leitch said the U.K. position is that if they could find any other operationally effective island, they would use it. Meanwhile, they are prepared to take necessary conservation measures to keep damage to the absolute minimum. Air Commodore Clementi noted that a report was expected within a week or ten days from an RAF officer who participated in the recent survey on Aldabra.

As regards the "bird strike" problem, Air Commodore Clementi believed it would be manageable and that action could be taken to keep the hazard within bounds. He noted, however, that we really will not be sure of the extent of this problem until construction has started and we see how the bird population reacts. He expected that Mr. Wright, a British scientist with the current Aldabra survey team, will conclude that there is a bird strike problem and will make recommendations for dealing with it.

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Mr. Moss expressed the view that if the British Government is prepared to stick with it, the scientists' ecology case can be handled. Unlike the U.S., there is no Parliamentary action required.

Air Commodore Clementi noted that the scientists are vulnerable on at least two points:

1. The scientists have done so little up to now about protecting Aldabra from other potentially serious intrusions (e.g., cats and rats left by occasional fishermen stopping on the island.)
2. If military discipline were introduced to the island, it should be possible to do much to protect the wildlife.

Mr. Leitch agreed to provide to the U.S. as soon as possible a British statement on how to deal with the scientists' concerns and a summary of the results of their surveys and other related information. Mr. Leitch then raised the question as to how to handle the public relations aspects of the problem. He said for the moment the U.K. proposes to say, if queried, that they are continuing to examine jointly with the Americans the question of a facility in the area. He expressed concern, however, that if there should be a risk of something coming out on this subject in the United States, we would need to concert in advance on a public statement.

Mr. Kitchen said our research and engineering people are anxious to get out a public statement, and we have a draft of such a statement; but he expressed the view that it would be better to wait until we have the benefit of the information the British have agreed to provide in the next 8 or 10 days. He suggested we then rework a public statement that could be issued before the U.S. Congressional hearings on appropriations for Aldabra begin. He reemphasized the U.S. requirement for material that would help us in accomplishing with U.S. scientists what the British have apparently achieved with their scientists.

Mr. Leitch agreed to put together a factual summary and a summary of material used in talking to British scientists, and to forward it to the U.S.

Mr. Kitchen said he had come prepared to ask for another look at Farquhar, and noted that the U.S. Air Force would be prepared to send a team to make such a survey; but in light of today's discussion, he was not pressing this point. It was agreed that a joint statement should be issued before the U.S. Congressional hearings begin, possibly in early October.

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Mr. Kitchen visualized the sequence of future action as follows:

1. Secretary McNamara would do a background briefing for U.S. scientists in the early future, based in part on material to be provided by the U.K.
2. Secretary McNamara would then reply to Mr. Healey's letter.
3. The U.S. Government would then seek Congressional approval for funding.

It was agreed that (1) it would be desirable to develop, in addition to a joint public statement, a detailed back-up paper containing questions and answers; (2) it would be desirable to proceed with agreement on what specifically would be done on the island. In the latter connection, the British promised to send to Mr. Spiers within a week a proposed draft agreement.

Subsequent to the meeting, a technical examination by U.S. and U.K. officers indicated that the British have in fact studied Farquhar and Assumption Islands in much detail. It was agreed that in light of the operational constraints envisioned by the RAF there would be no basis for sending a survey team to Farquhar unless Aldabra is abandoned in the future for reasons not now apparent.

HAAKON LINDJORD
Colonel, U.S. Army
Director, Policy Planning Staff

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