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D/DG Op Pol 4/3 (96/04)

18 June 2004

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MINISTER FOR DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

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HQ ARRC DEPLOYMENT OPTIONS

ISSUE

1. Decisions, ahead of the Istanbul Summit, on the deployment of HQ ARRC.

TIMING

2. Priority: decisions need to be taken as soon as possible to inform announcements at Istanbul (28-29 June), and the preceding Defence Ministerial (27 June).

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Secretary of State should:
 - Note that Istanbul is an ideal opportunity to announce decisions on HQ ARRC deployment, both to inform participating countries of our intentions and to ensure that our decisions strengthen the UK's standing within the Alliance.
 - Note that three options for ARRC deployment are on the table:
 - Option A (deployment to Afghanistan in 06, and postponement of our contribution to NRF);
 - Option B (deployment to Iraq, and postponement of our contribution to NRF); and,
 - Option C (continued commitment to NRF6 in early 06).
 - Note that officials have reopened discussions (without prejudice) with the Italians about a possible back-to-back arrangement in ISAF, in which HQ ARRC would deploy to command ISAF in mid-2006.
 - Agree that: if Ministers decide against deployment to Iraq (Option B), there are sound military and political reasons for committing the ARRC to Afghanistan in mid-2006; we should therefore pursue Option A (deployment to Afghanistan, and postponement of our contribution to NRF); and consequently send the letter at Annex A to the PM.

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PRESENTATIONAL ISSUES

4. The situation in Iraq currently receives far greater coverage than that in Afghanistan, while the system of NRF rotation is virtually invisible from the public point of view. Although there has been recurrent speculation about possible further major UK troop deployments to Iraq, this has remained to some extent in the background, as political developments and the security situation have continued to hold centre stage. The spotlight may well shortly turn to NATO as a result of the Istanbul Summit, and hence to NATO's planning for Afghanistan, but there is every chance that Iraq will also feature strongly in coverage of the Summit, both because of the near-coincidence of timing with the formal transfer of sovereignty and because of the opportunity for comment about transatlantic differences.

5. From this point of view, a decision to deploy the ARRC HQ to Iraq would play to themes of divisiveness (since it would not go as a NATO formation) and potentially to themes of NATO weakness. This latter theme is already at risk of being accentuated by the lukewarm response of member states to NATO's plans in Afghanistan. Conversely, an indication in favour of making the ARRC available for Afghanistan (or even confirmation that it will keep its place as NRF 6) would reinforce a positive interpretation of NATO's relevance and vigour. The obvious conclusion is that a decision in favour of Iraq would need to be supported by a very strong political or military rationale, preferably both; stewardship of the forthcoming elections, where HQ ARRC has the potential to have an effect in creating the right security conditions, could be a factor in this respect. Overall, however, the political rationale remains opaque, with latest assessments of the timelag in deployment weakening any obvious operational rationale. ✓✓

6. So far as timing of announcements is concerned, an Iraq deployment would be much more difficult to handle. Given that this would constitute an operational decision (as opposed to merely a plan) it should normally be announced first to Parliament. The proximity of Istanbul now makes it very difficult to manage the choreography proposed in my minute (DG Op Pol/4/6/1 (91/04)) of 11 June: if a decision were announced at Istanbul we would have difficulties in Parliament; if a decision were announced to Parliament shortly before Istanbul we would have difficulties with Allies and NATO. If we decided to pursue Option B, therefore, there would need to be urgent discussion with No. 10 and FCO about handling.

7. If this were impossible - or considered imprudent - in the immediate run-up to Istanbul, it would be necessary to regard the decision more as a proposal at Istanbul, which Allies were being consulted about, and which would then be announced to Parliament on return. (Our current position, after all, is that we are consulting Allies and partners about this issue.) While this might be thought to assist the aim of making NATO appear more relevant to Iraq, it would nevertheless also undermine attempts to claim that NATO's top priority is Afghanistan.

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8. Maintaining the NRF commitment would have the least presentational impact domestically. It would however be welcomed in NATO, within which the UK has taken a leading role in the development of the NRF concept.

9. We have now initiated work on a presentational strategy for Option A in anticipation of SofS' decision; a strategy for Option B is already in existence.

BACKGROUND

Option A: HQ ARRC to Afghanistan

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18. This far in advance of any potential deployment to Afghanistan, it is not possible to guarantee that the anticipated benefits would materialise. On balance, however, this option provides a credible and militarily sustainable opportunity to demonstrate the UK's commitment to Afghanistan and to NATO, while also providing HQ ARRC with a valuable operational opportunity, albeit not in the near-term. An early, joint UK/IT offer to SACEUR would also provide a reasonable justification within NATO for withdrawal from the NRF6 commitment.

Option B: HQ ARRC to Iraq

19. The arguments for and against deploying UK and multinational elements of HQ ARRC to Iraq have been addressed at length in previous papers and in discussion with Ministers. While further work is unlikely to shed new light, it is worth bearing in mind that, because of the time required to ensure the availability of essential key equipments, the timelag between a decision to deploy and the achievement of full capability in theatre would be considerable:

- A decision on 28 June would allow HQ ARRC as a multinational HQ to reach initial operating capability in mid-September, and full operating capability by 1 October.
- A decision on 26 July (after 3 Commando Brigade's return from Exercise AURORA) to prepare a brigade, if followed by a decision to deploy it at the earliest possible date, would allow the brigade to reach initial operating capability in mid-October and full operating capability by 8 November.

20. In addition, the situation in April which prompted the original informal US military request for assistance in the South (and particularly in Najaf and Qadisiyah in the light of the Spanish withdrawal) appears to have stabilised, with signs that even Al Sadr is taking a more moderate line and pursuing political aspirations. The US are planning to replace their current military presence in that area with much smaller and less capable forces. There has been no pressure from US Principals to provide further assistance. Nonetheless, while the military rationale for such a deployment may have

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receded, there is still an aspiration to exert greater strategic influence over Coalition operations, both in the South and across Iraq. It is difficult to predict at this stage in which direction the security situation will develop, with the forthcoming elections possibly providing a focus for rejectionists. Experience in other theatres suggests that there is a security premium associated with elections, and an HQ ARRC deployment to Iraq might have a role in this respect.

21. General Abizaid recently stated to the NAC that his preference would be to see a NATO Corps HQ (i.e. the ARRC) responsible for the two current sectors in the South, perhaps reflecting a US conflation of ARRC's respective corps HQ and NATO HQ roles. UK PERMREP advises that deployment of the ARRC as a NATO HQ will be unacceptable to some Allies. Additionally, were there a risk of strategic failure, we may wish to consider an *in extremis* deployment of the ARRC to Iraq regardless of declared commitments, though it is by no means certain that the ARRC would be the right solution in these circumstances; we should certainly not plan against this eventuality at this stage.

Option C: Maintain our commitment to the NRF

22. The UK is politically and militarily committed to the NRF concept, and HQ ARRC is currently scheduled to provide the Land Component Command (LCC) HQ and associated force elements for NRF6 from Jan-Jun 06, with the related NATO force generation conference (FGC) scheduled for 13 July 2004. NRF6 is potentially a greater commitment, in terms of force levels, than deployment to either Iraq or Afghanistan. If either Option A or Option B were preferred, we would need to announce our intention to withdraw from the LCC element of the NRF commitment at least two weeks ahead of the FGC to assist NATO in addressing which nation might assume the NRF6 commitment (UK maritime and air components would not necessarily be affected by withdrawal from the LCC element). While SACEUR has indicated that he would willingly adjust the NRF rotation in favour of operations, further deferral of a decision on the UK's involvement in the NRF rotation would not be acceptable to NATO, and would occasion considerable work within NATO to cover the withdrawal.

23. If we chose now to withdraw from NRF6, it should be possible to commit to the NRF at a later point in the rotation.

Overall Commitments

24. The UK's overall commitments burden is likely to remain at its current high level in the short-term. Were HQ ARRC to deploy as HQ ISAF, the UK might be expected to provide COMARRC with a 'critical mass' of UK troops, and to fill any mission critical gaps. The extent of this challenge, including the impact on harmony, would depend on the task as identified at the time, and the willingness of others to provide the necessary capabilities. Nonetheless, we assess that deployment of HQ ARRC Group in 06 is achievable, providing that our commitment to Iraq is no larger than Medium Scale at that stage

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(assuming the timelines for strategic handoff in 06 are met, force levels in Iraq at that time should be no more than Small Scale); in addition to other force generation factors, two overlapping Medium Scale operations would place considerable strain on our logistic capability. There is also an outside possibility that HQ ARRC would be in a position to undertake more than one of the commitments discussed in this submission, but this would need to be subject to careful sequencing of a kind which cannot be predicted or planned for at this juncture.

25. It has become apparent that SACEUR has requested a light brigade with considerable logistic support for NRF6, and LAND are planning to provide 7 Armd Bde. The UK will be better placed to provide the required force elements after JRRF recuperation (from late 2006). A decision to withdraw HQ ARRC from NRF6 would include withdrawal of the other UK land force elements from the rotation. This would provide welcome headroom to the UK's current heavy commitments burden. It would also avoid a difficult situation later, should the decision be made at some point to deploy an additional brigade to Iraq; this would not be achievable if we were also committed to NRF6.

HQ ARRC's Operational Credibility

26. HQ ARRC has hitherto been regarded as NATO's pre-eminent warfighting formation – the cutting edge of the HRF(L) force rotation. A deployment to Iraq would significantly reinforce these operational credentials, though it could undermine its position as a reliable NATO asset and might make it difficult to reintegrate into the HRF rotation. A deployment to Afghanistan would also reinforce these credentials, particularly if unified command were achievable, while also signalling renewed commitment to NATO in general and the HRF concept in particular. Maintaining the commitment to NRF6 would signal our continued commitment to the NRF concept, while not necessarily guaranteeing an operational deployment.

SUMMARY

27. Istanbul is a decisive point in deliberations on deployment of the ARRC, and it would be extremely difficult (both presentationally and substantively) to delay decisions beyond the Summit. The argument is finally balanced between deployment options, though the case for deployment to Iraq is perhaps less compelling now than it was in Apr/May, while those for Afghanistan are somewhat stronger. If SofS decides that deployment to Iraq now is not appropriate, then he should decide in favour of deployment to Afghanistan. CDS agrees with this recommendation.

[signed on original]
MARTIN HOWARD
DG OP POL
3/39M/T 82135

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DECLASSIFIEDAnnex ADRAFT LETTER FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO THE PRIME
MINISTER

We have discussed on several occasions the options for meeting the US request for further support in Iraq. As the CDS and I have explained, the imperative here is predominantly political rather than military, though we have proposed deployment of UK and multinational elements of HQ ARRC as a possible solution. I believe that the next few days are crucial in deciding whether we wish to do this or not, as NATO needs some clarity on our intentions at or around the Istanbul Summit. If we do not provide such clarity, we risk diminishing our standing within the Alliance.

The case for deploying HQ ARRC to Iraq is that it would provide a highly visible expression of UK commitment to Iraq and of support to the US, and provide certainty within NATO where currently there is speculation. It might also increase UK influence over the direction of the overall campaign, and have a role to play during the election period. The downside is that it will be difficult to present domestically (at a time when we are arguing for the Iraqis to take on more responsibility for their own security), and does not provide any military effect until well into the Autumn.

The alternative would be to deploy the ARRC to Afghanistan, probably following on from the Italians, in mid-2006. This option would: help to build stability in Afghanistan; yield considerable political capital for the UK within NATO, specifically at Istanbul; enhance NATO's credibility at a crucial point in the organisation's development; and send a clear signal of UK support to President Karzai ahead of this Autumn's elections. With current and planned deployments in Iraq and the Balkans, and the potential for picking up a NATO Response Force rotation in a longer timeframe, it would also give a good strategic spread both over time and geographically. I believe that these

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factors add up to a strong rationale for deploying the ARRC to Afghanistan, rather than Iraq.

If you are content, then, I would intend to announce our intention to deploy the ARRC to Afghanistan at the Defence Ministerial on 27 June; naturally we would need also to consider the timing of any Parliamentary announcements. You might wish to follow this up with a statement at the Summit itself.

I am copying this letter to Jack Straw and Hilary Benn.

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