

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CABINET
BY THE HON. PRIME MINISTER

Appreciation by the North Atlantic Council
of the Strategic Situation in the Mediterranean

As Ministers are aware it was agreed during the rundown talks in London that a joint approach would be made by Malta and the United Kingdom, to the North Atlantic Council, requesting the Council to carry out an appreciation of the strategic situation in the Mediterranean with particular reference to the security of Malta.

2. The joint approach was made on 11th August, 1967, and at the same time a request was made by the Malta Government for an indication how Malta could or should be associated with the study. It is not known yet when the study will take place or whether Malta will be associated with it, but in anticipation that it will be so, the attached paper has been prepared, setting out the proposed political and military lines of approach with which Ministers are kindly asked to say whether they agree.

9th November, 1967.

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In a Joint Statement of the North Atlantic Council and the Government of Malta issued on 3rd November, 1965, the North Atlantic Council confirmed the deep interest of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in ensuring the security of Malta and affirmed the agreement of its members that consultation should take place between NATO and the Government of Malta whenever, in the opinion of the Government of Malta, or of any of the members, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of Malta is threatened, as well as their willingness to discuss all matters which may concern the relationship between NATO and Malta, including that of the establishment of further arrangements with Malta.

2. In accordance with the terms of this statement, the Governments of Malta and the United Kingdom made a Joint Approach to the North Atlantic Council to undertake an appreciation of the strategic situation in the Mediterranean with particular reference to the security of Malta against external aggression and the forces required to counter the assessed threat and to ensure the security of Malta. A request was made by the Malta Government for an indication how Malta could or should be associated with the study.

3. Briefly, the Malta Government's contention is that, whilst Malta continues to offer the military use of facilities to both the United Kingdom and NATO (a) because she supports the Western Alliance and is therefore prepared to let the Alliance use such facilities for its own purposes, and (b) because she considers that the Alliance offers the best form of protection and is therefore prepared to allow use of such facilities for her own purposes, the progressive withdrawal of United Kingdom forces from the Mediterranean, combined with a lack of intimate military and political relationship with NATO itself, engenders a sense of uncertainty as to (a) whether the U.K. Government is in fact still capable of fulfilling her defence obligations to Malta, and (b) what effective action NATO would be prepared to take in the defence of Malta.

4. The practical position at the moment is that Malta, an independent country, is relying for the defence of her national sovereignty on simple statements of capability and willingness on the part of the U.K. Government and NATO respectively to protect Malta against attack, and it is inconceivable that an independent state should entrust the defence of its sovereignty to other countries and organisations without being continuously informed of the dangers arising from a fluctuating international situation, and the measures being taken to meet them.

5. The United Kingdom Government maintains that it is perfectly capable of defending Malta with forces flown out from the United Kingdom. NATO is silent as regards the military forces it would be prepared to deploy for this purpose.

6. The British Government may or may not be right in its contention. It has been proved that a fighter defence can come out within a matter of hours, if refuelled in mid air, whilst the heavy transport aircraft like the Hercules, Belfast, Argosy, Beverley and VC 10 can all make the trip to Malta in one hop. As against this, one might suggest that (a) they are not very fast and could be intercepted in flight, and (b) the assumption that they will come by the quickest route might in practice prove to be misplaced. Assuming, however, the forces and equipment can be flown out rapidly, the question of a ground defence of the airfield, harbour and radar installation to ensure their use by incoming forces still seems to be unanswered. It must likewise be assumed that the necessary forces will be available immediately they are required, and not allotted to other tasks.

7. Force strength and dispositions will inevitably depend on the threat. It is likely, from informal information available, that NATO's current thinking on the Mediterranean, is that whilst they recognise the vital importance of the Central Mediterranean area, they regard the increased Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean as a political rather than a military threat. In terms of military strength, the Russians have nine submarines, four guided-missile cruisers, and a number of smaller craft, totalling in all about thirty ships. Their movements are closely followed, and NATO can pinpoint their positions exactly, at any given time. Likewise, the preponderance of allied armament is so great that the Russians would not have the slightest chance if a clash were to come. The balance could change within the next five or ten years, but the present assessment is that the threat, including that from North Africa, is infinitesimal, and is fully under control.

8. If this informal information proves to be correct, the NATO Study is not likely to expose any areas of weakness in direct relation to Malta, and will not as a consequence by itself provide grounds for arguing against the continued progress of the rundown.

9. On the other hand, in accordance with the typical NATO policy of allocating areas of responsibility to their members, there may be a case for arguing against further British withdrawals and for pinning the British to a definite commitment for the defence of Malta and the Malta area. There is also a clear case for the establishment of closer military and political links with NATO so that the Malta Government is kept fully abreast with both military and political thinking in so far as it affects Malta. Furthermore, there are indications that the British may not be unwilling to revise their plans for a rundown on the scale at present programmed.

10. In the light of the above, it is considered that the Malta Government's approach to the Study, if association with it is accorded should be based on the following points:

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- (a) The evident lack of a static defence for vital installations required to be used in the defence of Malta.
- (b) The need for a closer relationship between Malta with NATO in both the military and political spheres so that the Malta Government can be fully in the picture with regard to events as they affect or are likely to affect Malta.
- (c) A more positive definition by the U. K. Government of the manner in which they propose to fulfil their defence obligations.