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(A 470/21/45)

Proposed Conference on matters concerning the Pacific
Islands between His Majesty's Governments in the
United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

Note by the Foreign Office.

The main object of this conference in so far as concerns its civil aviation aspect is to formulate an agreed policy as to the practical methods which could be employed to induce the United States Government to consent to a four-party conference for the development of air communications in the Western Pacific. In spite of repeated attempts* to elicit a reply, the United States Government have hitherto failed to respond to the invitation to take part in such a conference which was originally addressed to them on the 30th March, 1938. It is understood that their reluctance is due to the unwillingness of the United States Navy Department to accord landing facilities to British aircraft at Hawaii.

* See the memorandum annexed to the Foreign Office brief of 22nd November prepared for the inter-departmental meeting on Pacific Islands which took place on 24th November.

Until the above-mentioned practical methods are available to bring pressure to bear upon the United States Government to take part in a conference, there is a risk that they may take some new initiative in developing their own policy of acquiring for themselves a monopoly of civil aviation facilities across the Pacific by asserting claims to individual islands hitherto regarded as British. In particular it is to be anticipated that they may take such an initiative in respect of Hull Island in the Phoenix Group or Christmas Island, both of which possess exceptional potential

facilities/

facilities for the establishment of an air port.

Whilst the precise form in which the United States Government are likely to assert further claims to the above-mentioned or other islands cannot be foreseen, it would seem probable that they might adopt one or other of the alternative courses mentioned under heading (1)(a), (b) or (d) of the agenda for the conference under reference which has been submitted to His Majesty's Government in New Zealand. It is the view of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom that the general line to be adopted when confronted with any of these courses should be to insist with renewed vigour upon the need for settling the problem at issue by way of a conference on aviation facilities rather than on the basis of discussing the sovereignty of individual islands. In so far as Christmas Island is concerned His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are of opinion that their title is unassailable, and they are prepared to resist any claim to it to the point of arbitration.*

* See the discussion under Item 4 of the interdepartmental meeting held at the Foreign Office on 24th November, 1938.

It is also their view that the British title to Hull Island is sufficiently strong to enable them, if the necessity arises, to threaten to refer to arbitration the disputed claim to this island. If, however, the United States Government thereupon fail to abandon their claim to Hull Island, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom consider that it would be advisable to offer them a position on the island precisely similar to that which they themselves occupy as the result of the establishment of a régime for the use in common of Canton and Enderbury Islands for purposes connected with

international/

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* See the proposal contained in Foreign Office memorandum of 17th October, 1938.

international aviation and communication.* Such a concession would in practice be confined to allowing the United States Government to obtain a nominal share in the administration of Hull Island together with the right, after the payment of an agreed fee, to enjoy the use of such air facilities as may be developed there. As, however, the foregoing offer would preclude the possibility of using Hull Island as a bargaining counter in the efforts to obtain reciprocal landing rights for British aircraft at Hawaii, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom would suggest that it should only be put forward as a last resort. The prospect, if the need arises, of persuading the United States Government to abandon their claim to the island is in any case strengthened by the fact that arrangements are proceeding for its colonisation by natives from the surplus population of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and the United States Government are already aware that this island is included in a humanitarian scheme for the settlement of these natives on islands of the Phoenix Group. By withdrawing their proposal for the colonisation of Canton Island in deference to the wishes of the United States Government, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom have moreover provided themselves with an additional argument for claiming that the United States Government should disinterest themselves in other islands of this group.

FOREIGN OFFICE,

14th January, 1939.