Argentina and the Falklands:
Thirty years on

A Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing

By Peter Cannon
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Executive summary:

◊ 30 years on from the Falklands War, Argentina has escalated its diplomatic and economic campaign to claim the Falkland Islands from the United Kingdom (UK).

◊ Argentina has complained to the United Nations (UN) about the UK, accusing it of ‘militarisation’ of the South Atlantic. This is clearly unjustified as the reasons for the UK’s military presence is Argentina’s continuing claim to the territory following its unsuccessful attempt to take the islands by force in 1982.

◊ Argentina has received support in its campaign from neighbouring countries and leftist political leaders in Latin America. The United States (US) administration unhelpfully states that it “takes no position regarding sovereignty”.

◊ Spain has also sought to renew its claim to Gibraltar and to call for bilateral negotiations over sovereignty. Like Argentina, Spain seeks to act without reference to the self-determination of the population of the territory.

◊ Concerns have been expressed about the UK’s capacity to repeat its success of 1982 in the event of an Argentine invasion of the Falklands, particularly following the Strategic Defence and Security Review. However, the islands are much better defended now and it is highly doubtful that Argentina has the military capability to launch a successful invasion.

◊ There is, however, no room for complacency given Argentina’s behaviour. The UK must retain the will and the capability to defend the Falkland Islands and the rights of the Falkland Islanders, alone.
Argentina’s complaint to the UN

In this year of the 30th anniversary of the Falklands War, the dispute over the Falkland Islands has reached a new level. In February, Argentina formally complained to the United Nations (UN) over the United Kingdom (UK)’s alleged ‘militarisation’ of the South Atlantic. According to the Argentine government, by deploying HMS Dauntless (a Type-45 destroyer) to the South Atlantic, the UK was “militarising the region”. 1 Argentine foreign minister Héctor Timerman presented the UK as an imperialist power, displaying a map of UK bases across the South Atlantic between South America and Africa and complaining that the “Empire’s capital” was 4,000 miles away, and adding: “It is the last ocean that is controlled by the United Kingdom – Britannia rules only the South Atlantic.” 2 Similarly, Argentine president Cristina Fernandez argued “this militarisation poses a grave danger to international security... We cannot interpret in any other way the deployment of an ultra-modern destroyer accompanying the heir to the throne, who we would prefer to see in civilian attire.” 3

This was an extraordinary complaint to come from Argentina, given that the reason for the British military presence in the South Atlantic is to deter any repeat of Argentina’s 1982 invasion of the islands, in an unprovoked attack to take the islands by force against the wishes of the population. As the Falkland Islands are British sovereign territory, British military deployments there should not be Argentina’s concern, but are for the UK to decide. Similarly, the deployment of Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, as an RAF search-and-rescue pilot is a routine deployment which cannot realistically be said to pose a threat to anyone, and which is none of Argentina’s business.


The Argentine foreign minister sought to raise the level of alarm at the UN by accusing the UK of sending nuclear weapons to the area. Timerman stated: “Argentina has information that within the framework of the recent British deployment in the Malvinas Islands they sent a nuclear submarine ... to transport nuclear weapons to the South Atlantic... The information Argentina has is that there are these nuclear weapons.” He argued that this violated the Treaty of Tlatelolco for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean. Needless to say, this was a ridiculous accusation as the location of the UK’s nuclear deterrent submarines is a closely guarded secret, and as Trident missiles have a range of up to 7,500 miles anyway. The UK’s ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Mark Lyall Grant said “We do not comment on the disposition of nuclear weapons and submarines. I don’t know how he knows about submarines. I certainly don’t know. The whole point of nuclear submarines is that they go all around the world and you don’t know where they are. That’s why they’re a deterrent.” 4 Sir Mark pointed out that the UK’s defence posture had not changed, and that HMS Dauntless was replacing another ship.

Support for Argentina’s campaign to isolate the Falkland Islands

Argentina's complaint to the UN is but the latest step in Argentina’s diplomatic campaign to isolate the UK in its refusal to negotiate over its sovereignty over the Falklands. This has been accompanied by a mounting campaign to isolate the islands economically. Argentina claims the seas around the Falklands as Argentine waters and attempts to stop ships from reaching the islands. Ships rounding Cape Horn heading for the Falklands are routinely stopped, searched and delayed, with the result that many merchant vessels no longer attempt the journey, which results in periodical shortages of goods. Argentina has also put pressure on Chile to end the weekly flights from Punta Arenas to Port Stanley, which pass through Argentine airspace.

Argentina recently succeeded in persuading neighbouring countries to refuse access to their ports to ships flying the Falkland Islands flag. On 15th December 2011, the Mercosur group of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay agreed to block any ship flying the Falklands flag to enter their ports. This was followed by a similar move this month from the left-leaning Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) bloc. This included Commonwealth members Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. This follows support for from the newly formed Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which held its first summit in Caracas, Venezuela, in December 2011. At the Caracas summit, CELAC issued a ‘Special Communiqué Project on the Malvinas Islands’ stating that members of CELAC support “Argentina’s legitimate rights in the sovereignty dispute over the Falklands/Malvinas, Georgia del Sur and Sandwich del Sur Islands, as well as its surrounding maritime spaces.”

Some leftist Latin American leaders were particularly outspoken. Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador, called for further actions against the UK, telling other ALBA leaders: “It is time for Latin America to decide sanctions against this mistaken power that pretends to be imperialist and colonialist in the 21st century. I think we have to apply more forceful things. We have to talk about sanctions.” Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez offered Argentina military support in the event of any war, declaring: “I’m speaking only for Venezuela, but if it occurs to the British Empire to attack Argentina, Argentina won’t be alone this time. Venezuela is no power, but we’ve got some weapons and the will to face any imperialist aggression.”

Cuba’s Fidel Castro mocked Britain’s military position, saying: “Somewhere is the English ship sailing to the Falklands but the English only have one little boat left. The only ones who have aircraft carriers are the Yankees. All the English can do is send over a destroyer, they can’t even send an aircraft carrier.”

Limits to the support for Argentina

There are limits to the support which Argentina has received. Shortly after the ALBA summit, the Dominican government released a statement saying that “Dominica disassociates itself from statements regarding the banning of ships carrying the flag of

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the Falklands from entering its ports.” Antigua and Barbuda also distanced itself from that part of the ALBA declaration. 13 Despite the Mercosur ban on Falklands-flagged ships, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay all agreed with the British Government that Falklands shipping flying the Red Ensign or another national flag would still be admitted to their ports as normal. 14 This means that the ban should have little practical effect.

Argentina’s complaint to the UN about the UK’s ‘militarisation’ of the South Atlantic has, unsurprisingly, got nowhere so far. The Argentine press lamented the fact that the Argentine complaint has not generated “a single international condemnation, verbally or through a resolution”. The press offices from UN Secretary General Ban Ki moon and the UN General Assembly president Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser sent out official releases following their meetings with Timerman, but neither of them referred to the alleged UK militarisation of the South Atlantic. The president of the Security Council, Kodjo Menam did not even bother to issue a press release on the meeting, according to Argentine press correspondents in New York. The most Argentina was able to get from Ban Ki-Moon was a statement that he was “willing to coordinate among both sides if the countries so request it.” 15 As the UK does not wish to negotiate, this situation will not arise.

The position of the United States

The United States (US) administration quickly dismissed the Argentine claim of ‘militarisation’, with US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland saying: “The UK has made clear to us and to the Argentines that what they are engaged in, in a naval capacity is normal and is typical for this time of year. So we don’t have any reason to question that.” 16 Similarly, when a journalist asked about the deployment of Prince William, Nuland responded that his deployment was “as part of his normal work”. 17

However, the US’s position on British sovereignty over the Falklands is less than helpful, with the official position being “We recognize de facto United Kingdom administration of the islands but take no position regarding sovereignty”. 18 Considering the overwhelming desire of the Falkland Islanders to remain British, the fact that the islands have been continually British since 1833 (before many US states became part of the Union) and the alliance between the US and the UK, there is no justification for the US not to recognise British sovereignty over the Falklands. Nor is it reasonable for the US Acting Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roberta Jacobson, to call on the UK to ‘negotiate a diplomatic solution’ with Argentina. 19 As this is a British territory whose population wishes it to remain a British territory, there is nothing to negotiate.

The stance of the Obama administration has not been without criticism from within the US, with Robert O’Brien, an advisor to Mitt Romney arguing that President Obama is ‘not reliable’ to its allies: “He has not been with Israel regarding Iran and he is not being with Great Britain in the issue of the Falklands, and all the fuss the Argentines are making over that”. 20 A recent editorial in Investor’s Business Daily criticised the Obama administration for “Codding the aggressors in the name of ‘peace.’” and an inability

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to decide “between our top ally, Britain, and Hugo Chavez-aligned Argentina”. Republican Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner recently visited the Falklands, and stated that if the United Nations “means what it says,” it should support “the decision that Falkland Islanders had made for themselves. Rather than being treated to PowerPoint presentations by Foreign Minister Timmerman, they (the UN) should back up the self-determination of Falkland Islanders.”

The issue of Spain and Gibraltar

At the same time as Argentina’s renewed efforts to force negotiations over the Falklands, the UK is also facing renewed diplomatic pressure from the Spanish Government over Gibraltar. The new centre-right Popular Party government has called for bilateral negotiations between the Spanish and British governments over the British overseas territory, without including the elected government of Gibraltar. In a gesture of the new government’s more hard-line attitude, the new foreign minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo greeted a British Conservative Member of the European Parliament with the slogan “Gibraltar, Español!”

More seriously, Garcia Margallo has said that the trilateral Dialogue Forum (between the British, Spanish and Gibraltar governments during the time of the previous Socialist government) “in its Socialist version is dead”.

Speaking after the Somalia conference in London on 23rd February, Garcia Mallego commented: “There’s no need for a prophet or a Pulitzer Prize to know that in the coming UN session, Malvinas and Gibraltar will be discussed and that the UN will again reiterate that we must sit and negotiate”. Worryingly, he added that the cases of the Falklands and Gibraltar “look alike because they are included in the UN list of territories subject to decolonization; because the principle of self-determination is not applicable.” Garcia Mallego also stated that he would write to the British Government to formally reject the principle that the Gibraltarians themselves should have the right to veto any negotiations.

Given that Gibraltar is democratically self-governing; that it has been a British territory since 1704 and was ceded by Spain to the UK in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713; and that the population has overwhelmingly rejected the idea of Spanish and shared sovereignty in referenda in 1967 and 2002, this approach is completely unjustified and blatantly anti-democratic.

Gibraltar itself also has a new, Socialist, government which is absolutely opposed to any negotiations with Spain over Gibraltar’s sovereignty. The new chief minister Fabian Picardo, responded to the Spanish Government’s demands by saying: “We are always hopeful that Spain will follow us into the 21st Century and drop its claim on our land... We are seeing what appears to be a more proactive desire by Spain to raise the sovereignty issue... it seems to me the Spanish have other more important priorities than historic claims over my people.”

In October 2011, following an agreement to base US anti-missile warships at Rota, former Labour Europe minister Denis MacShane MP wrote in the Spanish newspaper

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El Mundo: “London must now ask itself seriously if its constant refusal to discuss a new agreement on Gibraltar has any strategic sense, when Madrid has moved on to occupy the place as the main ally of the US in the area of defence.” 26 Given the overwhelming 99 per cent rejection of the principle of any sharing of sovereignty between the UK and Spain by the Gibraltarian people in the 2002 referendum, any attempt to reach another agreement with Spain over their heads would be a shameful betrayal. Negotiating over a prosperous, peaceful and democratic territory (and military base) that has been British for over three centuries against the wishes of its people makes no strategic sense whatsoever, particularly when the UK is facing aggressive claims on another one of its territories.

Why the UK should not negotiate with Argentina

Peter Slowe, a former financial advisor to the Blair government, recently argued that the “UK must hand the Falklands back to Argentina”. Slowe argues “both Britain and Argentina have had serious doubts at various times about their respective claims to the Falkland Islands” and “Argentina and Britain both feel they have a right to the Falklands based less on legal rights than on different concepts of natural justice”. Slowe argues that Britain and Argentina had been willing to negotiate before the Falklands War and that “On the 30th anniversary of the Falklands War, it is surely time for a compromise”. Slowe’s ‘compromise’ is that “Britain should cede sovereignty to Argentina while ensuring by treaty with the now-democratic government of Argentina that the tiny local population can continue to enjoy local democracy and a ‘British’ way of life.” Astonishingly, Slowe concludes the argument by saying “Then 904 young servicemen, who should by now be old or middle-aged, will not have died in vain.” 27 Yet 255 British servicemen died liberating the islands after the unprovoked Argentine invasion in 1982. To give away sovereignty now, against the wishes of the population, would be the betrayal of their sacrifice.

Ceding sovereignty to Argentina is not a ‘compromise’ but a capitulation. If the islands were to become Argentinean, promises of local democracy and a ‘British way of life’ would becoming meaningless and unenforceable. When Argentina has tried and failed to take a British territory by force and now attempts to bully and blockade its population, there is no justification and no discernible benefit in rewarding Argentina with sovereignty. As the Henry Jackson Society’s George Grant recently pointed out, Argentina’s relative proximity to the Falklands and the UK’s distance does not confer any legitimacy or logic on Argentina’s claim. 28 It is also worth remembering that Argentina also claims South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, with which it has no historical connection whatsoever, as well as the British Antarctic Territory. Most importantly, of course, such a move would completely violate the self-determination of the islanders. The UK is often accused of ‘colonialism’, but to bargain away a territory and a population against their wishes for financial or other diplomatic motives would be the most gross form of colonialism and utterly unacceptable in the modern world.

In the Guardian, the historian Richard Gott argued that “Britain is asleep over Argentina and the Falklands” and “South America is growing in strength and increasingly united.” Gott argues that “Britain must wake up to this new reality” by agreeing to negotiate with Argentina. Latin America has indeed become more united behind Argentina’s claim and more hostile to British sovereignty over the Falklands.


27 ‘Comment: UK must hand the Falklands back to Argentina’, Peter Slowe, Politics.co.uk, 7th February 2012, http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2012/02/07/comment-uk-must-hand-the-falklands-back-to-argentina

28 ‘Argentina has no more claim to the Falklands than Canada does to Alaska’, George Grant, Daily Telegraph, 8th February 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/9069338/Argentina-has-no-more-claim-to-the-Falklands-than-Canada-does-to-Alaska.html
That is no justification for giving up on the British Government’s commitment to protect the rights of the Falkland Islanders to self-determination. Such a public display of weakness and bad faith would hardly be beneficial to British diplomacy, or to attempts to promote and defend human rights and democracy worldwide. It is highly doubtful that giving in to Argentina’s bullying will ingratiate the UK with the ‘anti-imperialist’ leftist political leaders of Latin America, rather than simply emboldening the anti-British and anti-US mood. It is encouraging that the British government is seeking to strengthen relationships with Latin America, but this should not come at the price of denying the most basic rights to Britain’s own people and betraying our own values.

The defence of the Falkland Islands

With the heightened tension over the Falklands, attention has inevitably turned to the defence situation in the islands, and whether the UK would be able to repeat its success of thirty years ago were Argentine forces to attack the islands again. There is no doubt that the Islands are much better defended now than they were in 1982.

Whereas in 1982 the Falklands were defended by 70 Royal Marines, there is now a British garrison of 1,200, plus 200 reservists in the Falkland Islands Defence Force. There is now an RAF base on East Falkland, Mount Pleasant, with four Eurofighter Typhoon strike fighters, a Hercules transport plane, a VC-10 tanker plane and Rapier surface-to-air missiles. Mount Pleasant could of course be reinforced by air in an emergency. In 1982, the South Atlantic was patrolled only by HMS Endurance, an Antarctic ice patrol vessel. Now, as well as the Antarctic patrol vessel HMS Clyde, the South Atlantic is patrolled by the Type 45 destroyer HMS Dauntless and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary support vessel RFA Gold Rover. There is also likely to be an attack submarine, although the UK does not comment on submarine deployments. With the Typhoon fighters and the UK’s naval presence, it would be difficult for Argentina to transport land forces across 300 miles of ocean to invade the islands. The possibility of an Argentine special forces operation to capture RAF Mount Pleasant has been suggested, but they would face 1,200 British troops. Professor Michael Clarke, director of the Royal United Services Institute, concludes: “There’s no way Argentine forces could ever take Mt Pleasant air base.”

The UK’s problems would come in trying to retake the Falklands in that worst case scenario of Argentina managing to take or destroy RAF Mount Pleasant. With the Strategic Defence and Security Review having left the UK without carrier strike capability following the retirement of the Harrier fleet and HMS Ark Royal, assembling a naval task force with air cover as the UK did in 1982 would be impossible. With no carrier-based jet aircraft, the UK’s one remaining aircraft carrier, HMS Illustrious, is being used as an assault ship and is due to be decommissioned in 2014. The UK is not due to have another aircraft carrier until the planned completion of the first of the two new Queen Elizabeth class carriers in 2020. The 1982 task force had two aircraft carriers, in 2012 the UK has none. British air power would have to operate from Ascension Island, which is 4,000 miles away.

During House of Commons defence questions, defence secretary Philip Hammond told Parliament that “plans exist for rapid reinforcement of the land, sea and air forces in and around the islands should any such threat appear.” It has been reported that the Ministry of Defence has contingency plans for a

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rapid response ‘mini task force’ to be formed from the Response Force Task Group, an amphibious unit set up in 2010. More Typhoon fighters would be flown to RAF Mount Pleasant, troop reinforcements would be flown in by the air bridge from RAF Brize Norton to Ascension Island and ships would be sent from Plymouth, the Caribbean and the African coasts. Much of this would still depend on RAF Mount Pleasant remaining operational and in British hands.

Former Chief of the General Staff Sir Mike Jackson has argued that in the event of Mount Pleasant falling; “our ability to recover the islands now would be just about impossible. We are not in a position to take air power by sea since the demise of the Harrier force.” Similarily, Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward, who commanded the British task force in 1982, warns that “we can do precisely nothing”. RUSI’s Michael Clarke argues that it would still be possible to retake the islands through long-range air power. If Mount Pleasant was taken by Argentina, bombers from Ascension Island could destroy the base and any Argentine defences, after which British special forces could be dropped to regain control. This would be a far from straightforward option.

Argentina’s military capability also needs to be considered. While the UK’s armed forces are much smaller than in 1982, so are Argentina’s. The percentage of Argentina’s GDP which it spends on defence is less than half that of the UK. Whereas the UK’s armed forces are much better-equipped and more technologically advanced than in 1982, Argentina has hardly updated its military hardware since the Falklands War. Gareth Jennings, head of the air desk at IHS Jane’s, observes: “Argentina has not purchased a single new combat aircraft since before the war in 1982... Essentially, it has the same air power it had back in 1982, minus the aircraft that were shot down. They didn’t fare too well against the Sea Harriers then and they’d be torn apart by the Typhoons today.” In addition, Argentina no longer possesses the landing craft to enable an amphibious assault. Michael Clarke goes so far as to argue that while the Falklands war was 30 years ago, “in military terms it is 100 years ago,” as British forces have advanced about 60 years in sophistication, but Argentine forces have barely improved.

What next?

This is the main reason why an Argentine military attack is, in the foreseeable future unlikely. Yet such an event cannot be ruled out. The 1982 invasion took the British government by surprise. There is no room for complacency now.

It is therefore encouraging that the security of the Falklands was discussed at length by the UK’s National Security Council. David Cameron made clear: “The reason for holding a National Security Council – which also discussed other topics – is to discuss that issue, to make sure nobody is in any doubt that Britain supports that right of self-determination, and we will go on doing so for as long as people in the Falklands want to continue in that way.”

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Argentina’s actions mean that British inaction is not an option. Defence minister Arturo Puricelli raised the prospect of armed conflict, telling an Argentine radio station: “What the British have got to understand is that we tolerate them in the Falklands but if any armed English force invades Argentine territory, have no doubt we will exercise our legitimate right to self-defence and we have the capacity to do so.” Given that Argentina regards the Falklands and the surrounding areas as ‘Argentine territory’, this could be interpreted as a very broad threat. 43

Argentina’s diplomatic campaign continues. Fernandez de Kirchner has invited leaders from South America’s Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) bloc to join her in Ushaia on 2nd April at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. 44 On 25th February, a special session of the foreign affairs committees of the two houses of the Argentine congress was held, at which a cross-party group unanimously agreed the ‘Ushuaia declaration’ asserting the “legitimate and imprescriptible Argentine sovereignty over the Malvinas, South Georgia and South Sandwich and adjoining maritime spaces Islands” and condemning the “persistent colonialist and militaristic attitude of the UK in the South Atlantic”. 45 The Argentine government is also now seeking not just to blockade the Falklands, but to target the UK as a whole economically, with industry minister Debora Giorgi urging Argentine companies to stop importing British goods. 46

In the face of such attempts at intimidation, it is right for the British government to continue to demonstrate that it is ‘business as usual’ in the Falklands. David Willetts, the universities minister, visited the Falklands in February en route to the British Antarctic Survey. 47 MPs from the defence select committee are due to visit the Falklands in March, which has sparked predictable anger from Argentina. 48 There is little the UK can do which would not be interpreted as a ‘provocation’ by the Argentine government. It is right that such visits, which are entirely legitimate and normal in British territory and should be of no concern to Argentina, should continue unimpeded. Further diplomatic and economic pressure in this 30th year since the Falklands War and in future years is to be expected. The UK must retain the will and the capability to defend the Falkland Islands and the rights of the islanders, alone.


About the author

Peter Cannon is an Associate Fellow at the HJS. Peter studied a BSc in Government and History and an MA in the History of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has worked for the Shadow Justice Secretary and for a public affairs consultancy. He currently works for a Conservative MP in Parliament, and is also a local councillor in Dartford, Kent.

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