

Limited Aims and the Falklands War

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Introduction

The idea of “limited aims” characterizes modern-day warfare. Because states want to avoid long, costly, and bloody conflicts, quick “land-grabs” offer the most appealing strategy. The result has been a dramatic increase in limited aims strategies in the period following World War II. However the strategy has certain limitations, as it relies on assumptions that, if incorrect, prove to be catastrophic. This was the case during the Falklands War in 1982, when a weaker power, in Argentina, pursued limited aims in attempting to claim the nearby Falkland Islands (Malvinas) from Great Britain. In the end, failure to do so was the result of certain assumptions on which limited aims strategy relies. This essay will first examine limited aims strategy more generally, and then apply it to the case of the Falklands War, pointing out at which point the Argentine plan failed. From here, alternative strategies will be examined, none of which would have been very successful given the circumstances.

Limited Aims: Definition, Characteristics, and Limitations

According to Mearsheimer, “The limited aims strategy...is directly concerned with seizing a specific piece of territory; at the same time, the attacker seeks to limit contact with the main body of the oppositions forces...After securing his objectives, the attacker shifts from an offensive to a defensive posture and prepares for a possible counterattack.”[1] At this point, the onus is on the defender to initiate a larger scale conflict. This strategy appeals to many states today as it limits casualties, and decreases the chances of a large-scale war. Militarily weaker states in particular are more likely to pursue limited aims in an asymmetric conflict as it does not require taking on the full capacity of the enemy’s force, but rather a much more limited portion. This result in a much higher probability of victory.

The success of limited aims is reliant on a few key factors. Primarily, “...success is predicated on the ability of the attacker both to achieve surprise and to overwhelm the defender’s forces that are at hand before the defender can mobilize his main forces.”[2] Surprise is key to success. If the attacker is able to surprise the enemy and set up defensive posturing before their opponent can mobilize their full forces, the first part of a limited aims strategy has been successful. Without surprise, the strategy is destined for failure. Accompanying this idea, it is also important to consider how the enemy is configured defensively. If the defender’s forces are not in their “forward positions” limited aims has a much higher chance of success.

Along with these tactical factors, limited aims strategy is reliant on certain assumptions, the most important of which applies to how the defender will react to the quick “land grab.” Assuming the surprise works and the attacker is able to capture the land and set up defensive posturing, “...the burden of starting a war of attrition is transferred to the defender. The assumption is that the defender would not start such a war and therefore the conflict will remain limited.”[3] This is especially true for asymmetric conflicts, as a stronger state would be less likely to start a war of attrition because doing so would hurt its international reputation. A militarily superior state would be seen as bullying the weaker state if they escalated the conflict fully and inflicted devastating damage on its opponent. This is the ideal scenario. If the country that was attacked initially does in fact retaliate, the state pursuing limited aims will at this point already have defensive fortification, giving them an advantage if the conflict escalates. In this sense, limited aims is a much less risky offensive strategy than any other. The taboo on seemingly starting wars of attrition has emerged following WWII. Because of this, the latter part of the 20th century has seen a vast increase in limited aims strategies.

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However, there are still certainly risks involved. If a state fails to surprise its enemy, the defender will have already moved into its forward position when the attack begins. The result will be a disastrous military failure. Limited aims strategy also often relies on a key assumption that the enemy will not retaliate. If this is incorrect, the conflict could escalate into a war of attrition, likely spelling the end for the militarily weaker state. This occurs more often than not, as the defending state will want to regain lost territory and punish the aggressor in order to maintain their reputation and calm domestic criticism. [4] If this seems likely, the limited aims country will have to ask itself if it has the capability to defeat the other state. As will be discussed, this last assumption is key to understanding why Argentina was defeated in the Falklands War. While a limited aims strategy carries fewer risks than other conventional offensive strategies, there are still risks involved, the most uncertain being how, and to what degree, the defending state will react. Miscalculating this has the potential to cripple the strategy

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The above description is key to understanding the Falklands War of 1982. Based on historical assumptions, Argentina's leadership wrongly predicted how Britain would react to their "land grab." In addition to this, growing aggression by Argentina caused Britain to mobilize their forces before the initial attack, limiting the effectiveness of the element of surprise. This portion of the essay will first examine Argentina's tactical plan and why it seemed to have a high probability of success, then will shift towards why the plan failed.

"Operation Azul" as it was code-named outlined the plan for invasion. About 3,000 troops would be landed in a surprise invasion that targeted the Island Administration and the Port of Stanley in order to cut off arms supplies. This would be easy to accomplish, as it was calculated that about eighty Royal Marines protected the Islands. Once this was accomplished, the majority of troops would be removed, at which point the newly established governor would be able to negotiate with Britain in regards to the Falkland Islands' sovereignty.[5] But what made the Argentine leadership so sure that Britain would respond to the military action with a diplomatic, rather than military response?

To begin, Britain had long demonstrated an inconsistent policy towards the Islands: "Many times these [British] governments gave contradictory signals to Argentina, one of which was a willingness to discuss the sovereignty issue, but without providing a realistic timetable or a plan on how to implement the vague promises. Britain also did not unequivocally commit its forces to protect the islands against a possible invasion by a disgruntled Argentine regime." [6] Successive British governments were willing to talk about sovereignty, but did not want to face the domestic criticism that giving the Islands sovereignty would inevitably bring. The result is a gray area that must have been frustrating for the Argentine leadership. However, the more important consequence of the ambiguous British policy is that it seemed as if the British were indifferent towards the Islands. This is due to the fact that they did not take a hard line on the sovereignty issue. Argentina had claimed sovereignty over the Islands for years. Although there existed a preliminary plan for invasion since the 1940's, Argentina would have liked to gain control over the islands diplomatically, as this was much less risky. Offers from Britain to talk about the issue gave various Argentine governments the impression that military intervention may not be necessary. However, after some time it became clear that the British were not serious about giving Argentina sovereignty over the Malvinas. But because they had also not taken a hard line, it seemed unlikely that they would be willing to engage in a war in order to defend the Islands. This belief was reinforced by the Thule Incident of 1976, when Argentina sent over a group of technicians to one of the Islands without any military intervention from Britain.[7] This contributed to Argentina's calculations that if they captured the distant land, Britain would be unlikely to retaliate. However, this is not the only factor that they considered.

Historical experiences had led Argentina to believe that even if Britain wanted to retaliate, the United States of America (U.S.) would stop them. This assumption was largely based on the Suez Crisis in 1956, where "The United States took the lead in opposing the [British/French] attack on Egypt...The United States refused a loan to ease pressure until Britain agreed to a cease-fire...Succumbing to this pressure, the British government, over the objections both of the French government and officers in the field, agreed to a cease-fire..." [8] Based on past crises, The U.S. had substantial influence over Great Britain. Based on recent experience, the Argentine leadership believed that the U.S. would almost certainly side with them: "The Junta's support for the secret operations in Bolivia and Nicaragua convinced the military leaders that the Reagan Administration would reciprocate its support by

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sympathizing with Argentina's struggle against Britain in the Malvinas."^[9] This, in addition to Argentina being a key ally to fighting communism in Latin America seemed to guarantee U.S. sympathy if a conflict was initiated. This was an extra level of insurance whereby even if Britain wanted to attack the Islands that they were seemingly indifferent to, they would be forced to stop because of U.S. pressure. At the very least, it was believed that the U.S. would remain neutral in the conflict, giving Britain less incentive to attack on a large scale. The combination of factors made the Argentine leadership certain. Leopoldo Galtieri, the Argentine President at the time later remarked, "Personally, I judged any response from the English scarcely possible, indeed absolutely improbable."^[10]

Errors in Argentine Assumptions

So where did the plan go wrong? Firstly, the Argentine invasion failed to surprise Great Britain. An initial conflict just days before the invasion on the Island of South Georgia caused the British to send over two submarines and a store ship towards the Islands.^[11] Argentina had not planned to invade so soon, but the prospect of additional British forces on the Islands led them to launch the invasion early. While they were still able to capture the Island's Administration with ease before the additional presence got there, the British anticipatory measure gave them the opportunity to prepare for a military conflict. But this is not the only advantage, as a later invasion would have benefited Argentina, who was waiting on the delivery of several weapons for its navy. However, the early invasion had little effect on the final outcome of the War, as even with the additional firepower, Argentina was greatly outmatched by Britain.

The most damaging error in the Argentine plan was their assumption in how both Britain and the U.S. would react. Argentina's success depended on a limited British response, as "Britain's military expenditure was six times higher than Argentina's, allowing it to have superiority in firepower, technology, and training."^[12] If Britain responded with its full military capacity, Argentina did not stand a chance. This proved pivotal, as despite previous ambiguity in regards to the Falklands, Britain responded to the invasion with heavy military force: "Within two weeks of the invasion Britain mobilized a large naval task force and a small army of elite troops, including marines, paratroops, and Gurkha mercenaries...The British [also] launched long-distance bombing attacks on the Falkland's main airfield at Port Stanley."^[13] This degree of reaction was simply not considered in Argentina's invasion plan. The assumption that Britain would not react intensely was a grave error, and one that Argentina should have at least planned for as a possibility. But it was not just errors in assumptions about Britain that spelled defeat for Argentina.

According to the plan drafted by the military junta in Argentina, the U.S. would prevent any large-scale reaction by Britain. In fact, they did the exact opposite when on May 1, 1982, "The United States condemned Argentina for 'the illegal use of force' in seizing the islands and now refusing to withdraw. On these grounds the Reagan administration imposed economic sanctions against Argentina and offered Britain arms and technical intelligence support."^[14] Argentina's plan for invasion had misjudged alliances. The United States and Britain were strong trading partners and were strongly bound together through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where the idea of collective defence outlines that if a NATO ally is attacked, this is considered as an attack against all member nations.^[15] This would clearly take precedence over any small assistance Argentina had given the U.S. in a regional conflict. The assumption that the United States would prevent Britain from attacking was a gross miscalculation.

Lessons from The Falklands War

It should be clear at this point that Argentina's plan for invasion relied on assumptions that were too uncertain and carried high consequences too dire. Of course, it is easy to examine a conflict in retrospect and point out the errors. With this in mind, there are still certain possibilities that the Argentine leadership should have foreseen and planned for. However, outside pursuing their attack of limited aims, Argentina faced few alternatives if they were to gain sovereignty over the Islands.

While it is true that Argentina would have had more substantial firepower if they had waited a few months for weapons they had ordered to be delivered, they still would have stood no chance against the vastly more powerful Great Britain with the United States on its side. If the leadership had known the degree to which Britain would react to the invasion, in addition to the U.S. assistance, it is unlikely that the invasion would have been launched. As pointed

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out previously by Mearsheimer, if limited aims is to be successful, the attacking state needs to ask itself: "is the victim state likely to attack?" and if so, "will we be able to defeat the victim state if it does attack?" Argentina put too much emphasis on the former question, not providing a secondary plan if they were incorrect in their assumption that Britain would not attack. At the same time, the entire conflict could have been avoided had Britain taken a definitive stance on the Islands. The resulting "gray area" that was Britain's policy led Argentina to believe that Britain did not care enough about the Islands to intervene on a large scale militarily. Still, in drafting the limited aims plan Argentina should have considered the possibility and consequences of a large-scale British response. Argentina misjudged how both Britain and the U.S. would react to the conflict. While the British misjudgment is understandable given historical experience, overlooking the U.S./Britain NATO alliance is a glaring tactical error.

Because Argentina faced a much more powerful opponent that had strong allies, it faced few options if it was to rule the Malvinas. Clearly, limited aims did not succeed. Any other direct military intervention was out of the question due to Britain's vastly superior firepower. The only alternative from here would have been diplomacy, although had been attempted for many years prior, and to no avail. In this sense, Argentina had little possibility of success regardless of the course of action they took.

Conclusion

A limited aims strategy works perfectly if the enemy determines that the territory taken is not worth spending the time or money fighting over. In the event that this does not occur, states must consider if they are able to defeat the enemy from a defensive position. If both of these criteria look unlikely, limited aims should not be pursued. After examining the Falklands War, it is clear that Argentina miscalculated in their assumptions of how, and to what degree Britain would react. In the end, this was the primary reason for Argentina's failure to gain sovereignty over the Falkland Islands.

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[1] John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1984, 53.

[2] Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 53.

[3] Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 54.

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[4] Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 54.

[5] T.V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152.

[6] Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, 148.

[7] Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, 151.

[8] Louise Richardson, *When Allies Differ: Anglo-American Relations During the Suez and Falklands Crises* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 17.

[9] Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, 158.

[10] Leopoldo Galtieri, "No criamos que la Gran Bretana se movlizara por las Malvinas," 125.

[11] Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign, Volume 1: The Origins of the Falklands War* (New York: Routledge), 203.

[12] Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, 146.

[13] David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 378.

[14] Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987*, 379.

[15] "Collective Defence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, accessed April 1, 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_59378.htm

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