

# The Falklands War: Differing Causes of Conflict

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The Falklands Islands war is seen by many in international relations as an anomaly that is unlikely to happen again. To understand the Falklands War one must look at the region and times that the conflict took place in to understand the impact this had on the conflict, in this case the South American regional security complex in the 1980s. However this regional complex is not altogether relevant to the war because other regional powers remained largely silent about the war, as the conflict did little to upset the balance of power within the region. The most telling contribution of the complex is the overriding economic struggles that plagued South America in the 1980s. The United Kingdom and Argentina were the only primary actors within the context of the conflict, although the UN, and in particular the U.S.A. were involved at the beginning of the conflict to try and mediate between the two countries. The primary problems of this conflict were the Argentine Junta's hope to gain support and legitimacy by claiming territory that had a strong emotional tie to the country, and Britain's response to the territorial aggression of Argentina. Examining this conflict is interesting given the many different complexions it takes on. Diversionary theory is the most useful in understanding why the conflict happened in the first place, especially in regards to the bureaucratic authoritarian regime in Argentina, although it can also be used to show how British government used the war to its political advantage. Secondly, looking at the conflicts territoriality is extremely gratifying as both nations had claims to the Falklands/Malvinas for over one hundred years, with both countries registering strong emotional ties to the islands, in particular the sovereignty of the islands. Finally James Fearon's *Rational Explanations for War* argument can be used to show a situation where the bargaining range contracts suddenly and causes issue indivisibility. This essay will evaluate the conflict in light of these three theories and make clear how their theoretical tenants are shown by the conflict.

The South American regional complex is largely dominated by, Brazil, and Argentina, as they are both in the same sub-complex, the Southern Cone and have traditionally been viewed as the strongest powers within the region, with Brazil often considered a regional hegemonic power, due to its relatively massive economy when compared to the rest of South America. The region in the cold war period was dominated by domestic instability, although the cold war had very little to do with these issues. Buzan and Waever postulate that regional forces would mobilize to try and influence the situation. However the region itself is only moderately linked, and the Falkland islands crisis had little effect within the regional complex as such the other South American states stayed out of the conflict and the region as a whole had little interest in the action, except, perhaps Chile who had disputes with Argentina over the Beagle islands, and were interested in who would win the war as it might affect their bargaining later on (Buzan & Waever, 2007).

The problems and issues at stake in the Falklands War were the legitimacy of the Argentine government and their subsequent use of the Malvinas to legitimize their government to their disenfranchised people, the other major issue is territory, both intangible and tangible claims on both Britain's and Argentina's part influenced the actions and reactions of the nations. For Argentina the islands held native territory ties and they made claims of historical sovereignty, these territorial ties were also augmented by the fact the Junta knew the war would cause support and possibly give them greater influence over the South Atlantic (Levy and Vakili:1992). Great Britain on the other hand felt identity ties and current sovereignty, which limited the actions that the British government could take, similar to how the territorial ties limited the actions that the Argentines could take legitimately. The major actors in the conflict were the United Kingdom and Argentina; regional actors such as Brazil, Chile, remained largely silent. A tenuous case could be made to include the United States as a secondary actor; Reagan tried to mediate but to no avail as

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neither country could accept a compromise (Levy and Vakili, 1992).

To understand the Falklands War a brief historical foundation is helpful. The conflict has a long history beginning in 1833 when Britain claimed the island. The issue of sovereignty and ultimately of territory was largely uncontested however until the late 1970s when the new nationalist government in Argentina decided to make the islands central to their national goals. This centralization of the islands to Argentine international goals coincided with, 'the British government's policy towards the Falklands demonstrated its lack of commitment to the region in material resources' (Gibran, 1998:45). From 1976 to 1980 British aid declined to the islands. Some have even suggested prior to the war Britain, 'indicated its willingness to consider a solution involving Argentina's acquisition of sovereignty over the islands' (Gibran, 1998:46). From 1981 the conflict rapidly progressed to the genesis of war. The Argentine government's position became increasingly fragile as their economy began to falter. 'In 1980 inflation began to climb again into three figures' (Calvert, 1982:28). This rapid inflation caused a need for the government to react. In the case of the United Kingdom, the British Nationality Act of 1981 stripped many Falkland Islanders of British citizenship and further encouraged Argentina to make the Falklands an even more central issue. As Gibran (1998) wrote, 'probably the most influential signal received in Buenos Aires was the decision to withdraw the HMS *Endurance* in 1982' (Gibran, 1998:49). The Junta in Argentina decided to accelerate plans to invade from October to April because of the ever-increasing fragile economic and social unrest in the country that saw the Argentine people, 'call for labor demonstrations on March 30<sup>th</sup>' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:132). On April 2, 1982 the Argentine government invaded the Falklands, Argentina's control over the Falklands ended on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June when Argentinian forces surrendered. The United Nations had been contacted by the British to mediate but it proved to be futile. The biggest 'second-party' actor was the U.S.A. and even its part was tiny, with Reagan unable to mitigate between the two nations.

One way to look at the Falklands War is to survey the conflict through the scope of Diversionary theory. The Argentinian government's choice under Galtieri to engage in the Falklands conflict can largely be understood to have been influenced by the theory of diversionary action. This theory postulates, 'the use of external military force by leaders in order to advance their own domestic political interests.' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:118). Within this definition it is easy to see how Argentina's claims to the Falklands can be seen in this light. Argentina's economy in the early 1980s was failing, as Peter Calvert writes, 'the peso had to be devalued by a massive 23 per cent' (Calvert, 1982:53), in 1982 alone. This massive currency devaluation was leading to strikes for the first time in the Junta's history (Levy and Vakili, 1992). In addition to this the Junta had lost cohesion because of the victory in the 'dirty war', which left, 'the armed forces without an important mission that had unified them internally and helped legitimize their retention of power' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:129). With support failing all around them the Junta decided to begin, 'prioritizing the Malvinas issue.' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:130). The idea to focus on the Malvinas was two pronged, firstly it would create unity and solidarity among the Junta again and secondly would divert attention in the public away from the contracting economy and towards, 'a national symbol shared by nearly all segments of society.' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:130). The ruling party thought the use of an external 'scapegoat' was the perfect antidote to the growing dissatisfaction of the people. As Levy and Vakili wrote, 'actions undertaken for the purpose of enhancing one's own internal political support' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:119), were the basis for centralizing the Malvinas issue, as before 1976, 'the possible use of military force... was not... central to their thinking about the issue (Malvinas)' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:128). This is agreed upon by G.M. Dillion (1989), the 'advent of a more nationalistic regime in Argentina led... to a significant change in the military situation' (Dillon, 1989:1). The change in policy can be seen in the light of the harsh economic conditions that were forced upon the middle and lower classes of the country. With these harsh economic times, the government's hold on power was loosening and political support was waning. 'The successful recovery of the island would...provide legitimacy' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:131) to the government. The diversionary theory's central tenant about using an external issue to gain support is proven in the case of the Falklands War, 'a week after massive labor demonstrations against the regime, the people took to the streets once again, this time in enthusiastic support of the regime. Most of the political parties, business groups, and religious organizations all demonstrated their support for the invasion' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:134). This ground swell of support is exactly what the Junta was looking for as it would, 'prolong its hold on power' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:131). As one can see the diversionary theory of an external conflict being used to subvert a domestic issue is a very useful way of understanding how and why the Falklands War occurred, the legitimization of the regime was a key reason, in addition to that, the economic issues of the country were on equal footing, as such these two reasons combined to make a compelling case for a diversionary conflict for the Junta. Britain's use of the Falklands as a diversionary tactic

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is also an interesting one, albeit less compelling than Argentina's case, before the invasion the British government had largely been willing to let the Falklands go. In light of the invasion though Thatcher used the war similarly to how the Junta did and raised her approval rating by around 21 points (Lai and Reiter, 2005). 'The effects of the Falklands War on popularity were decisive in securing Thatcher's reelection in 1983' (Lai and Reiter, 2005:258). Through Thatcher's hard-lining the Conservative party won the election, once again showing that an external 'scapegoat' has a positive effect for a government, with the reservation that the war must go well for the country. However, 'A theory of diversionary behaviour must ultimately be integrated into a theory of political processes' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:137), in this regard is it worthwhile to look at the Falklands War in terms of the islands territorial significance to both Britain and Argentina.

'Almost every single study that controls for issue type finds that territorial issues often lead to international disputes and wars' (Gibler, 2012: 211). This is no less the case with the Falklands War. Both the United Kingdom and Argentina had strong territorial linkages to the islands dating back hundreds of years (Dillon, 1989). A useful case study to look at is Paul Hensel's and Sara Mitchell's, *Issue Indivisibility and Territorial Claims*, within this article they lay out why the Falklands was such an inflexible issue for Argentina and the United Kingdom. Britain's claims over the territory were both intangible, through the presence of sites that are emotionally tied to the country's population, and tangible, having a value placed on the site (Hensel and Mitchell, 2006). For Britain the intangible factors were sovereignty, and an identity value. The tangible claims were population and the possible resource value of the waters surrounding the islands. For Argentina the claims were the same in respect to tangible claims, their intangible claims however were the result of homeland claims and historical sovereignty (Hensel and Mitchell, 2006). The issue of territorial sovereignty seems the most important of the tangible and intangible factors, as both Argentina and Britain had sovereignty claims; as such sovereignty will be looked upon with great care. 'The Falklands crisis is first and foremost a dispute about sovereignty' (Calvert, 1982: 1). This declaration is understandable given that the issue of sovereignty traces back to 1833 when Britain claimed the islands. Argentina has ever since disputed that claim of sovereignty (Gibbon, 1989), and does not look likely to give up its position. However British views on sovereignty are very different pre-Falklands war up to the start of hostilities. 'Between 1965-1979 officials in the British devised a variety of formulas to accomplish British withdrawal from the South Atlantic' (Gibbon, 1989:1). It was a widely held policy that Britain's overseas commitments must be reduced in light of economic conditions that were affecting the nation (Gibran, 1998). In fact, 'Britain's lack of commitment to the region... manifested itself in... the government's determined effort to promote a negotiated settlement with Argentina' (Gibran, 1998:45). This lack of interest is baffling because when Argentina invaded the British government's response was quick and decisive with Prime Minister Thatcher declaring, 'I must tell the House that the Falkland Islands and their dependencies remain British territory' (Calvert, 1982:76). This assertion of sovereignty has been explained by David McCourt as, 'Britain's principled sense of Self was at stake... Britain's political identity' (McCourt, 2010:1599). Thus sovereignty is linked to the survival of the nation's identity, an intangible factor that led to retaliation and conflict. During the war, neither Britain nor Argentina would admit the others claim of sovereignty (Levy and Vakili, 1992). 'For both the Galtieri and Thatcher governments... left little room for compromise' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:134). As both government would have lost support and legitimacy if they had backed down. This again shows that national sovereignty of the islands was a hugely important issue of credibility to both governments and countries as both countries were unwilling to let the issue drop.

Finally, an alternate reading of the war through James Fearon's *Rationalist Explanations for War* can be useful to see how as soon as the invasion had happened both sides bargaining ranges dramatically reduced. Fearon's theory states that both sides should be able to come to an agreement in the bargaining range in order to prevent war; however the Falklands case disputes this. By invading the Falklands, 'the Junta had decided to experiment in brinkmanship' (Dillon, 1989:92). This display of force drastically reduced Argentina's bargaining range, making the domestic cost of backing down untenable to the government, Galtieri said, 'he would not last a week if he withdrew... from the Malvinas' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:134). Britain was forced to shorten the bargaining range due to this and a task force set sail. 'Mediation efforts... were constrained by the inevitability... of the task force in the South Atlantic' (Levy and Vakili, 1992:134). Britain's government felt the bargaining range had been reconfigured to Argentina's benefit and had to change the status quo. Thus both countries felt that a credible commitment from the other side was unlikely. The contraction of the bargaining range for both countries left the conflict with indivisible issues, the sovereignty of the islands, which in turn precluded any peaceful negotiated settlement from occurring, even though,

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'neither Argentina or Britain anticipated war, both found themselves locked into an escalating conflict from which neither one was able to extricate itself' (Gibran, 1998:53).

The Falklands War is a complex and interesting conflict that should be studied in International Relations in order to understand how and why conflicts occur. Surprisingly the regional complex played a very small role in the conflict, as regional actors remained largely silent because of the limited change to the region the sovereignty of the islands would affect. In fact the United Kingdom and Argentina were the only major actors in the conflict. The issues at stake, ranging from a diversionary tactic to engender support for the Argentinian government, and Britain's subsequent use of the war to gain support, to territory offer the chance for a wide range of analysis, in particular diversionary theory, territory, and the reduction of the bargaining range that leads to indivisible issues from Fearon's *Rationalist Explanations for War*. In looking at the war through these three different purviews one can begin to gain a clearer picture and understanding about why the Falklands War happened.

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