

Argentina's Perseverance and Stability in the South Atlantic

Written by Christian Scheinpflug

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CHRISTIAN SCHEINPFLUG, JUN 12 2016

At the end of March the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) allowed Argentina to extend its shelf to 350 nautical miles; beyond the Falkland Islands (or Malvinas, as they are known in Latin America). The CLCS is a UN body aiming "to facilitate the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" in cases where "the outer limits of the continental shelf" extend "beyond 200 nautical miles". The body issues recommendations that give states the right to extend their continental shelf, without these recommendations touching on issues regarding "the delimitation of boundaries between States with opposite or adjacent coasts" (UN 2012). Thus, the CLCS's decision does not resolve the Falklands question but skews it in favour of Argentina.

The Falklands consist of two islands located east of Rio Gallegos, a port city in southern Argentine Patagonia. Further east of the Falklands sits uninhabitable South Georgia Island. These two are the biggest islands, and together with Coronation Island and Elephant Island serve as natural border between the South Atlantic and the wider sea. This chain forms a half moon and seamlessly connects to the northernmost tip of Antarctica. Thus, the Falklands represent a key point of control over a basin (and trade routes) that connects Antarctica and South America. Full control over that basin would pressure Chile, which controls strategic territory in the South Pacific, but is relatively weak and also faces territorial challenges in the Atacama. Current arrangements resulting from the 1982 Falklands War prevent a scenario hostile to Chile, and Falklanders (or, kelpers) established "their status as an Overseas Territory of the UK", in a referendum in 2013 (Falklands Islands Government, 2013). Yet, any shift in the regional status quo sets in motion geopolitical dynamics that could elevate tensions and turn the South Atlantic into yet another crisis zone.

Argentine Imperialism

Resource-rich Antarctica represents the strategic pivot in the region. The local trade routes running through the basin formed by various islands and close to Chile and Argentina raise these countries' attractiveness as launchpads for missions, giving preference to the South Atlantic/South Pacific over the Indian or the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, Cape Horn (national park) in the South Pacific, and the Malvinas/Falklands are ideal spots for military bases to regulate Antarctic traffic. Therefore, these two locations would unlock the strategic potential of the region.

The only actor who really could bank on that potential is Argentina. To its geographical proximity comes vast territory with a substantial population, but a lack of military power. The CLCS's decision, however, has shown that Argentina makes up for that deficiency with diplomatic perseverance.

Given their strategic importance, the Falklands have constantly been submitted to military competition between the Spanish, British, and French Empires. After Argentina's independence in 1810, and French and Spanish withdrawal, the remaining competitor, Great Britain, created its right to colonisation by military might in 1833 (Freedman 2005: 3, 7). Argentina compensated for that loss, however, with brilliant strategy during the Pacific War of 1879-1883, which became a key episode for Argentine state building.

After Spanish decolonisation, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru emerged as actors with power projection ability

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over larger distances and each recognised that balance-of-power thinking, rather than domination, should guide their regional policy (Vidaurreta 1988: 8). Hence, the two most powerful actors, Chile and Brazil, pressured Argentina and Bolivia, with Chile in a privileged spot, since it controlled both the Atacama Desert and Patagonia, and was the sole actor in southernmost South America and the oceans surrounding it. In 1879 Chile's and Argentina's fortunes turned as disagreements over tax policy between Santiago and Bolivia ignited the Pacific War.

Orthodox historical interpretations consider only Peru, Bolivia, and Chile as warring parties. In this reading, Chile won the war. Following Sun Tzu and an alternative interpretation, however, Argentina won that war because it executed a perfect campaign, breaking "the enemy's resistance without fighting" (Sun Tzu 2000: 8). Drawing on Mearsheimer (2001: chapter 6), Argentina did so by employing three tactics: bait and bleed, bloodletting, and blackmailing. First, Buenos Aires threw the bait to Peru and Bolivia by promising military support in a possible confrontation. Once the bullets flew, Argentina ensured bloodletting by selling arms and supplies to its two allies, earning handsome profits and privileged access to natural resources (Vidaurreta 1988: 35, 36). Last, as Chile's troops marched into Lima, Argentina began blackmailing by deploying troops along the Patagonian border (Morris 1989:62) and threatening invasion. In such a scenario, Chile's mining industry would likely have lost the nitrate and copper rich territory in the north, and so Santiago handed over a substantial part of Patagonia.

In the end, Argentina eliminated a rival, gained oil and pasture rich Patagonia, and "moved" closer to the Malvinas and Antarctica, thereby boosting its regional influence. The ensuing economic take-off ran parallel to the socio-political project the elites pursued through a unifying mission, aimed to conceal class war under one Argentine identity. Although not entirely successful, the mission nonetheless created an almost homogenous society with established territory on the continent, claims to the Malvinas and the Antarctic, thus creating the so-called tri-continental project (Dodds 2000: 164, 165). The CLCS's decision gave this project a contemporary boost, and now Argentina's claims in Antarctica collide with Chile's (La Tercera 2016). The UN body thus acted like an arsonist in a firefighter's uniform and proves that law does not necessarily pacify an anarchic world order.

Until the late 1970s Argentina's tri-continental project focused primarily on the South Pacific, not the Falklands (Bautista Yofre 2011: chapter 1). Thus, in 1978 the "World Cup of the Beagle", as Argentines called it (TVN 1999: min 39:06), set off a dangerous episode. Around Christmas that year, Argentine warships simulated an attack on three islets – Lennox, Picton, Isla Nueva – located in Chilean territory in the Beagle Channel, which separates Chilean and Argentine Patagonia. Access to these islets facilitates access to Cape Horn national park, a bigger island located only 1000 km north of Antarctica. Argentina miscalculated but nonetheless acted rationally. After legal avenues through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and British arbitration had been exhausted, and a gap in Pinochet's authority opened (he was challenged in the Italian media by his Air Force General Gustavo Leigh; Collier and Sater 2002: 363), the junta in Buenos Aires had a pretext and still could exploit the searing World Cup fever. Had it succeeded, Argentina would have held the first key, Cape Horn, to regional hegemony. That it failed resulted mainly from Pope John Paul II. appearing on the scene. The US administration asked him to step in, and he was reluctantly accepted by the junta (Villar Gertner 2014: 218/219). The Pope ably channelled Catholicism's authority towards the relaxation of tensions – without, however, touching the real problem, which was Argentina's tri-continental, imperialist project. Ultimately, the Pope achieved a pyrrhic victory, because Argentina now turned to the Malvinas.

Argentina and the Falklands

Argentina had ample reason to believe in success. The junta knew that most Britons had no idea the Malvinas even existed. It also saw that Thatcher's social engineering created popular pressure and diversion from foreign policy. Moreover, in early conversations on the subject in the 1960s, the junta correctly gleaned that Downing Street was oblivious to political systems or competing national interests in Latin America (Costa Méndez in Bautista Yofre 2011: chapter 1). On top of it, in September 1981, Margaret Thatcher herself hinted at a "Hong Kong solution" to lease the Falklands to Argentina, similarly to its Asian possession. This would facilitate a steady transition of sovereignty, so all actors could get used to the new situation (Bautista Yofre 2011: chapter 1; Costa Méndez in Bautista Yofre 2011: Chapters 1, 3; Freedman 2005: 29).

The US would likely not intervene too, the junta figured, as high profile decision-makers like Henry Kissinger tacitly

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supported the "Dirty War". Furthermore, in 1976, Kissinger had emboldened Argentina by explaining to then-foreign minister Guzzetti that the Falklands "are no longer necessary to protect sea lanes" (Guzzetti and Kissinger 1976: 3, 9, 119). Kissinger, still a celebrated strategist, showed much ignorance regarding the geopolitical importance and explosive potential of the Falklands. Meanwhile, the junta's string puller, Admiral Anaya, followed closely the aggressive lobbying efforts of the notorious Falkland Islands Company. This company, virtually the only employer on the islands, stood to lose profits as well as decision-making power regarding island affairs, were it under Argentina's jurisdiction. It thus aggressively lobbied especially the British conservative press to make its opposition to Argentina known (Freedman 2005: 77). These efforts bore fruit and by the end of the 1970s no British head of state could decide on the matter without taking the company's interest into account. Thus, Anaya correctly sensed that time was running out for Argentina to gain a strong position in negotiations, i.e. blackmailing, over the islands. So, the junta took the initiative.

As the victors write history, Thatcher's resolve and the spirit of the task force naturally dominate the narrative of the Falklands war. This line, however, excludes the Argentine people as decisive factor. Morgenthau's (1948: 432) acid statement that "heroes, not horse-traders, are the idols of public opinion" came to life on April 2, 1982 on Plaza de Mayo, where General Galtieri triumphantly announced the conquest of the Falklands. More importantly, observing the popular fervour, the junta realised at this moment that blackmailing would not work (Galtieri in Bautista Yofre 2011: anexo 1) – the Malvinas were not another Patagonia. Argentina had to go all in or else the junta would lose face.

Initially, the blueprint of the operation, the so-called "D+5" plan, laid out the purpose of the invasion as being one massive show of force that would amplify the position at the negotiation table. As during the Pacific War, the Argentine military was supposed to be the bargaining chip at the negotiation table, rather than a fighting force (hence its poor equipment, often taken as sign of the junta's incompetence). According to the plan, the occupation should end after five days with only 400 soldiers remaining and carrying out police duties (Bautista Yofre 2011: chapters 2, 3, 4).

As is well known, the war did not turn out this way; neither did it solve the Falklands question, but still brought about the best possible outcome. Argentina, having framed the conflict as an anti-imperialist struggle on Fidel Castro's advice (Bautista Yofre 2011: chapter 4), captured the moral high ground. From this basis the country derived the energy to build diplomatic efforts with which it even penetrated Chilean policy-makers' neoliberalism, turning them into allies (or useful idiots). The kelpers entrenched their life on the islands and solidified their status with a referendum in 2013. British power has been constrained by lack of regional legitimacy, which puts the geostrategic spoils of the basin out of reach. Were Britain to change the status quo, diplomatic fallout would result and potentially trigger complete expulsion. The current constellation enables all members of the Antarctic Treaty to access the continent relatively freely, thus preventing bloc formation and hostilities.

Stability seems reinforced as at the 39th Consultative Meeting of the Antarctic Treaty this year in Santiago de Chile all member parties agreed to suspend territorial claims for the moment (Latin American Herald Tribune, 2016). Furthermore, Argentina's president Mauricio Macri seems interested in softening his country's approach towards the Falklands and London. Nonetheless, his administration remains committed to "recuperation", and he also has to respond to popular pressure. Also, the recent anniversary has shown that the Falklands still raise emotions in the Argentine population and thus Macri may fail in his efforts, just as one of his predecessors, Carlos Menem, already did (Dinatale 2016).

In an anarchic world the worst has to be expected and the permanent underlying geopolitical dynamics of the region must be excavated from the liberal fantasy. Should the current balance evaporate, Argentina would gain the greatest strategic advantage and sooner or later press the Beagle question again. A dominant Argentina may also un hinge the Antarctic Treaty, as members seek to gain favour with the most potent actor in the region. Therefore, Britain must stop insisting on the referendum and its victory in war and in cooperation with the Falklands government put forward a diplomatic offensive in the region and at the UN. Chile must recognise it is playing with fire helping Argentina and develop a strategy to juggle the tensions in the South Atlantic with those in the Atacama. Argentina, in turn, rightly celebrates its recent diplomatic success – amidst the complacency and ignorance of the others it seems the only country that currently understands the South Atlantic.

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