



## THE FALKLANDS DISPUTE A COLONIAL ISSUE ?

THIERRY FORTIN  
*Université de Strasbourg*

### *Introduction*

The 180-year-long dispute between Argentina and the UK is back in the foreground with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conflict and a revival of tension between the two nations following the oil drilling works undertaken by Britain since 2010 and the refusal to negotiate anything expressed by London. The Falklands case is an interesting one since it may slightly alter the classic vision of a smooth decolonisation process for Britain, as advocated by Clement Attlee in 1946 about the independence of India. The Falkland Islands, an archipelago of over 700 islands located at about 300 miles from the Argentine coast but unfortunately for London at about 8,000 miles from the British Isles, were seen from the beginning as a potential naval base in the South Atlantic with a possibility to control access between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans.

Even if the islands were allegedly first discovered by John Davis in August 1592, the first claim, although not entirely official, was expressed by London in 1690, just after the first recorded discovery of the islands by Captain John Strong. But since the first permanent settlement seems to have been established by the French in 1764, followed by a British settlement a few months later (with the Spanish being worried about both), Paris could also claim sovereignty over the islands, which could cause even more escalation to an already sensitive subject. As Lowell Steven Gustafson explained,

no one occupied or in any way used the islands until the French did in 1764 – 172 years after the alleged British discovery. The extended interval between a disputed British discovery and French occupation weakens Britain's claim to title by discovery. [GUSTAFSON : 4]

To sum up, at the beginning, the Falklands / Malvinas were a Spanish possession with a French and British presence. Then the archipelago became a Spanish possession with only a British presence after France handed over the rights to Spain. When the Spanish somehow got rid of the British in 1774, the Falklands / Malvinas were *de facto* controlled by Spain and later on by

the new South American entities having secured their independence from Spain, namely the United Provinces then the Argentine Confederation. Serious confrontations between the latter and the United States over fishing rights erupting in the early 1830s, the permanent disorder and uncertainty forced Great Britain to intervene by colonising the area with British citizens from 1833 onwards in order to mark the islands with a presence that would no longer be transient. It actually seemed the only way for London of controlling the Falklands in spite of the huge distance between the islands and Great Britain.

*1 : The making of a dispute: expanding Empire vs newborn nation*

The initial complexity of this dispute between France, Spain and Britain, then Spain and Britain and eventually between "Argentina" and Britain was born from the unstable situation in the territories coveted by the great powers of the colonial centuries (North America, South America, Africa) when entire regions moved from one domination to another in a matter of months or years. Indeed, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain's naval power coupled with the reputation of the Empire were a strong enough argument to claim sovereignty over a certain number of supposedly uninhabited territories (Africa / Australia) and that would also have been the case with the Falklands if the islands had not been so far away from the United Kingdom (8,000 miles, which is to say around 13,000km which at the time was a huge distance). Indeed it meant that any journey to the South Atlantic would take months, thus reducing the responsiveness of the decision-makers in London, especially with fairly limited power projection capabilities. Without any aircraft carrier or amphibious assault ship, when London decided to remove most if its presence in the archipelago in 1774 and just left a plaque and a flag as a claim to ownership, it was clear that the move was nothing more than wishful thinking and that the Spanish would take advantage of the proximity of the South American continent to exert control over the islands. And more than 200 years later, the significant distance was one of the main problems the Task Force had to face from the very beginning of the operation since it implied sailing for a few weeks to the South Atlantic before being deployed as such. This obligation forced some of the Royal Navy vessels to sail directly south from their initial NATO training deployment area, thus preventing them from unloading their nuclear ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) munitions in Britain before taking part in Operation Corporate [rna-10-area.co.uk]. There was indeed no time to lose before the Argentines could deploy more troops to the Malvinas and also before the beginning of austral winter, a set of meteorological conditions that would have become so harsh that even sailing or flying would have turned into a performance not to mention any combat operation!

Therefore it is clear that London had to use its influence and its colonial experience to secure its rights over such remote possessions.

Moreover, in the Falklands case, there was no aboriginal population, which urged the conflicting parties to use much more subjective arguments to push their sovereignty claims forward. In other terms, was the most legitimate claim that of the first country that allegedly discovered the archipelago (England) or that of the first country that established a permanent settlement on the islands (France)? It also seems impossible to ignore the claim of the new entities of South America claiming that the title was automatically transferred from Spain to the United Provinces then the Argentine Confederation when these territories got their independence from Spain. Nevertheless, the year 1833 appears as the one historical landmark and initial point of disagreement for Argentina since it marked the moment when Britain decided to reaffirm its sovereignty in an official way, in order to stop the disorder in the area since the American military raid in 1831<sup>1</sup> and the growing loss of control by London over the area since the settlement of a few businesses (such as Luis Vernet's) mandated by Buenos Aires and authorised by London. Indeed, 'Britain did not protest when Vernet's second expedition to the islands in 1826 succeeded in establishing his business interests under a concession granted by the Argentine government'. [GUSTAFSON : 22] The question at stake, which is still unresolved, is about the actual value of the mainly South American population on the islands before 1833. The main figure of the period was undoubtedly Luis (or Louis) Vernet, a former German citizen of Huguenot descent who emigrated to South America to start a business and was granted a concession in the Falklands by the Argentine government in 1823. He started raising cattle with around ninety *gauchos* but was replaced by Juan Mestivier after the destructive raid of the USS Lexington. Mestivier was charged by Buenos Aires to run a penal colony at San Carlos in East Falkland. His men mutinied and killed him, leaving the area with no real authority, which urged Britain to take immediate action and make a decisive move to revive its claim in a more powerful way this time. London sent two vessels, HMS Clio and HMS Tyne, as a showdown which proved successful since there was little or no resistance to the British decision to raise the Union Jack again. In January 1834, Lt Henry Smith became the first British resident as a permanent British Government representative and the first civilian settlers from Britain arrived from 1840 onwards.

---

<sup>1</sup> The USS Lexington being despatched by the United States to retaliate on the South American settlement after the seizure of several US ships by the "authorities" of the Malvinas led by Luis Vernet.

To this date there is no conclusive document proving that the mainly South American residents were expelled by force by London in 1833 (a document that Argentina would have obviously made public in order to better defend their case). On the contrary, it seems that the harsh living conditions since the havoc caused by the 1831 USS Lexington raid dissuaded a certain number of settlers from staying in the Falklands and that could explain why they were rather eager to be relocated in the mainland. As in Australia in 1788 with the first penal colony, London established its first official permanent residents in the South Atlantic territories after 1833, as a way of marking the archipelago with a British presence that would last significantly, generation after generation, and this human occupation and development strategy was effective since Britain maintained control over the area until spring 1982, when the Argentine junta led by General Galtieri seized an opportunity to invade the Malvinas.

Even if the dispute was more a territorial issue at the beginning because there was no real indigenous population at stake, the strong colonial background of the era (the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries) made it a more controversial issue. It became all the more serious for early Argentina since it had to strengthen its identity and owning South Atlantic islands and dependencies could be seen a first step to be universally recognized as a new emerging nation and no longer as an ex-colony with no real identity. To paraphrase David Ben-Gurion's famous quote about Israel that would be a state like any other when it finally had its prostitutes and thieves, we may say that Argentina perhaps needed a first possession or colony to be finally considered as a fully-fledged nation and no longer as a puppet state in the hands of European powers.

The situation started to evolve again after World War II because it marked the beginning of the end for the British Empire with the decolonisation process (1947 for India and the end of the British mandate in Palestine with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948). The loosened grip of London on quite a lot of overseas territories pushed Buenos Aires to take the case to the United Nations as early as 11 December 1946. An Argentine delegate to the UN stated publicly that Argentina did not recognize the UK's sovereignty over the Malvinas as an attempt to give more visibility to their claim and gain international support in the process. This strategy gained momentum in the 1960s with the rising power of the anticolonial movement led by non-aligned nations such as India, Indonesia and Egypt. General Assembly Resolution 1514 that was voted in 1960 called for *the end of colonialism in all its manifestations*, which urged Argentina to adopt an anticolonial stance to achieve its aim in the South Atlantic [un.org]. Action by Buenos Aires vis-à-vis the UN produced relatively positive outcomes in 1964 with the Committee of 24 (also known as the Special Committee on Decolonization)

recommending that Britain and Argentina enter into negotiations to settle their dispute.

However, the anticolonial approach was made weaker in the Falklands case because of a lack of domination over an indigenous or aboriginal population as was the case in India or Kenya (in other terms, expressed a bit more straightforwardly, nonwhites being dominated by whites). Consequently, support for Argentina from the ex-colonised nations never proved conclusive and was possibly mainly exerted against the ex-British Empire more than in favour of the new emerging South American nation. The best argument for Buenos Aires may be linked to geology and geography referring to the 1958 UN Convention on the Continental Shelf, giving strength to Argentina's claim because the Malvinas are part of the continental shelf facing the Argentinian coast. Yet, the Argentines may have underestimated it and focused on the anticolonial argument instead, driving their cause to a dead end.

## *2: The 1982 conflict: gunboat diplomacy?*

To many witnesses, the 1982 South Atlantic conflict could be seen as a revival of the so-called "gunboat diplomacy" that had been implemented a century before. Indeed, it may have reminded some of the world powers sending gunboats to restore their rights in colonial areas (to China for instance, to control the opium trade). But with a closer look at the reality of the Falklands War, it becomes clear that the operations were a campaign of symbols and illusions much more than a new colonial confrontation erupting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The multiplicity of symbols connected with History blurred the vision of many analysts and decision-makers and led them to take some of the events at face value, causing misinterpretations of the facts because of what they thought true and not questionable.

First of all, it is beyond doubt that heavy symbols were at work during this 10-week conflict. Seeing London, the centre of gravity of the ex-British Empire and the country that stood alone against the Third Reich, humiliated by the invasion of one of its overseas territories by a regional power stunned the whole world and more particularly Britain's partner nations within NATO.<sup>2</sup> The photograph of the surrender of the small Royal Marines garrison after a short firefight with the Argentine invasion force had a tremendous impact in London and infuriated even those who were known to be pacifists such as Michael Foot who spoke of Britain's "moral duty and political duty and every other kind of duty" to expel the Argentinians.

---

<sup>2</sup> In a speech to a Conservative Rally in Cardiff in 1979, Margaret Thatcher went as far as saying that Britain was the nation that stood alone in 1940 against the collapse of European civilisation!

[YOUNG: 265] This effect on British public opinion was probably underestimated by the junta in office in Buenos Aires, among other strategic mistakes committed by General Galtieri and his administration. On the Argentine side, the troops deployed with the invasion force were the alleged liberators of an Argentine territory that had been illegally occupied by a so-called colonial oppressor for almost 150 years. The move made by the junta was seen as the boldest ever undertaken to recover what was considered at least an integral part of Argentina's territory if not its deepest identity in spite of the fairly limited size of the land at stake in the dispute.

But the symbols soon turned to illusions for some of the protagonists like the Argentine conscripts who replaced the initial professional contingent having seized the Malvinas. They were actually surprised since they found an Anglo-Saxon population which was far from greeting them as liberators. The shock was triggered off by the discrepancy between the very cold welcome from the Falkland Islanders and the Argentine propaganda according to which the Malvinas and Argentina were just the same and that liberating them would turn the Argentine soldiers into heroes of the nation's History! To add to the confusion, with this military aggression on an English-speaking and mainly British population in the South Atlantic, it is as if the Argentine junta had become the coloniser and the UK, the oppressed side. The underestimation of this side effect of a military solution by the leaders in Buenos Aires actually helped Margaret Thatcher's government to identify with Britain in her finest hour of the Second World War, namely the year 1940, when England was fighting (almost) alone in Europe against an oppressor to liberate an invaded continent. Indeed, as Richard Vinen stated, "sharp-eyed observers noted that Thatcher's references to the Second World War tended to concentrate on one year of the conflict: 1940" [VINEN: 18].

Another sort of illusion was to believe that the warring nations were eternal enemies like France and Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, we should keep in mind the fact that both nations belonged to the Western Bloc facing the USSR and its communist allies and that Argentina was one of Washington's best allies concerning the anticommunist containment in South America. In addition, the anticolonial approach chosen by Argentina was made even weaker with the terrible records of the junta with regard to human rights violations since the 1976 coup giving full control of the country to the military. Therefore the Falklands / Malvinas War was rather a weird small-war fought for national honour and pride more than a colonial issue. What enhanced this jingoistic competition of national pride was the mirror effect between the two countries both in harsh economic situations and led by politicians who had to prove themselves because their records up to the first months of 1982 were far from being

brilliant to say the least. The Argentinian regime had been leading a "dirty war" against political opponents with torture and assassinations on a large scale since General Videla had started ruling the country in 1976 and the third junta led by General Galtieri had to face a terrible economic situation with demonstrations turning to riots on a daily basis and a growing discontent expressed by the population. The recovery of the Malvinas reversed the situation overnight and a huge crowd gathered at Plaza de Mayo to celebrate the junta's unexpected tactical victory over England while the same crowd could have lynched the rulers of the country 24 hours before!

As regards the UK, the country had just emerged from a terrible period of economic and social hardships with the notorious 1978-79 Winter of Discontent and many analysts saw Britain as the new "sick man of Europe", an infamous reputation of the late Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Margaret Thatcher was seen as a mere opportunist and an economy-oriented politician but certainly not as a leader for Britain. She had reached office in 1979 mainly because of Edward Heath's weakness and "the appalling mess left behind in 1974 by a Tory Cabinet – of which she was a member", not really thanks to her own moral and political strengths. [NOTT : 146] Furthermore, among the hardline Conservatives, many thought that she was not a credible Prime Minister as a woman, especially when we consider that she was the first female Prime Minister ever, in a political sphere with so many WWII veterans like Enoch Powell, for instance. The ex-British officer had reminded her of the high stakes of the operation at the beginning of the crisis: "In the next week or two this House, the nation and the Right Hon. Lady herself will learn of what metal she is made" [VINEN : 150].

Last but not least, another important background feature of the South Atlantic conflict at the time was the rising tension between East and West over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the massive nuclear buildup of the USSR in the 1970s and the 1980s, consequently enhancing the threat for the Western Bloc. This might have transformed the very nature of the Falklands War. In other terms, Operation Corporate became a test war for the Western bloc (under the scrutiny of the Warsaw Pact) and not a proxy war (because the belligerents belonged to the same bloc) or a colonial war (there was indeed no domination of a population by the UK but rather by Argentina!)

### *3: Fortress Falklands: mutation of the dispute*

After the 10-week-long high intensity conflict in the form of joint operations (with a total of around 1,000 soldiers killed in action) and very few civilian

casualties, the profile of the Falklands War was closer to a symmetric conflict of the Clausewitzian type than to a colonial conflict like the 1954-62 war in Algeria or the operations against the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the mid-50s causing a significant number of civilian losses, either as a collateral damage or simply because of the large-scale repression. The end of the combat operations also marked the end of the UK-Argentina cooperation in various fields. There was an immediate shift to Chile, one of London's precious wartime allies, for access to long-haul flights, healthcare and fresh food resupply. London decided to turn the Falklands into a fortress with a reinforced land-based garrison, the construction of a real air station capable of accommodating jet fighters and airliners and the permanent presence of a Royal Navy surface combat vessel, destroyer or frigate on rotational duty, to deter any Argentine attempt to undertake anything against the British presence in the South Atlantic. With an overall deployment whose exact strength is a secret but could possibly be equivalent to half of the total Falkland Islands population (around 1,500 troops), this situation could remind us of the North Korea-South Korea standoff (though to a lesser degree). It is an undeniably surreal confrontation in 2013, more especially between countries that are supposed to be democratic nations and part of the Western world. The dispute may have mutated into a small-size Cold War, far from a colonial issue, with a high amount of secrecy (most British Forces personnel at RAF Mount Pleasant have little or no contact with the population they are tasked to protect). In addition to the creation of Fortress Falklands, the UK chose to give more autonomy to the Falkland Islanders, probably to deflate the domination argument used by Argentina. The archipelago is now a self-sustained territory mainly due to the fishing activities and with a stronger Falkland Islands Government making the area a quasi-self-governing territory. Over the past few years, London has enhanced its communication policy towards the international community to ensure more visibility for the Falklanders and their right to self-determination, a tactic which will obviously be favourable to Britain. As a matter of fact, a delegation of 6 seventh or eighth-generation Falklanders went to New York on 14 June 2012 (30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Argentine surrender) to meet Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and remind her of their wish to remain within British sovereignty. Finally, a referendum about self-determination will be held in 2013 and it goes without saying that the results are already known because of the Anglo-Saxon origin of most of the Falklanders. Unsurprisingly, the referendum was rejected by the Presidents meeting at the 44<sup>th</sup> MERCOSUR<sup>3</sup> summit in Brasilia in December 2012. It is also interesting to notice that members of the Falkland Islands Government can

---

<sup>3</sup> MERCOSUR (Mercado Común del Sur) = Southern Common Market with Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela and Bolivia.



represent the Falkland Islands at the UN Special Committee on Decolonization (London does not necessarily attend the sessions any more).

Nevertheless, new problems may arise for London in the dispute. First of all, there is a continentalisation of the conflict by Buenos Aires with a Bolivar-style MERCOSUR support to Argentina. Along with a clear anti-British stance of countries already supporting Argentina for a long time like Brazil and Peru and other countries opposing foreign presence in Latin America like Cuba, we now find new supporting countries like Chile (the ex-eternal enemy of Buenos Aires), which is more surprising since Chile provided the UK with significant backup in the 1982 war. Another support which could be a source of concern for London, the People's Republic of China, has voiced its pro-Argentina position on several occasions (obviously with possible ulterior motives as regards sources of energy in the South Atlantic area). From a basic territorial dispute between two nations born from a colonial conquest era, the confrontation could become a proxy war between new world powers interested in the promises offered by the Antarctic as regards oil and other mineral resources and the huge reserves of protein (in the form of krill, the billions of shrimp-like crustaceans which make basic food for whales). Over the past decades, Argentina has never stopped accusing Britain of stealing Argentinian oil and reducing fishing resources in the South Atlantic.

### *Conclusion*

Even if the colonial argument is far-fetched from an ethnic point of view if we compare the Falklands / Malvinas case to cultural and ethnic domination situations as in the US or Australia, there is still a colonial feature in the dispute anyway. At least, the case is about British people living on a South American, if not Argentine, territory. I would say that the Falklands / Malvinas dispute is probably more an issue from the colonial era than a real colonial issue. But the matter at stake is that as a self-fulfilling prophecy, the colonial argument blocks the situation in an eternal standoff because of the highly conflictual background filled with ontological and historical symbols (Spanish coloniser *vs* South American colony / Spanish, French and British colonisers competing with one another / British oppressor *vs* Argentine victim / Argentine aggressor *vs* British indigenous population). Against the argument focusing on the right to self-determination wielded by the Argentines, London decided to respond by setting up a referendum in the Falklands in 2013. This is a way of using the argument of the Falklands' human identity against Buenos Aires which somehow becomes caught in its own trap.

A cooperation solution would probably be more constructive to escape the ideological dead end for the two countries involved but the 1982 conflict

actually aggravated the gap between them. The situation switched from a territorial dispute to a high intensity conflict with significant human losses on both sides. The memory of the fallen prevents any move on either side, the Conservatives in office in London could not politically afford the handover of the islands while many veterans are still alive and, as explained by British writer Peter Cadogan, “what we have failed to understand is that the Falklands / Malvinas issue is a religious matter in Argentina” [WOOLF & MOORCROFT WILSON : 24]. With the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1982 conflict in 2012, a visible rise of tension has occurred between London and Buenos Aires over the past few years, with a growing number of memorial celebrations broadcast on TV in Argentina. As a conclusion, even if a joint development of the Falklands / Malvinas area seems the best option in the long term to improve the relationships between the two countries as well as the lives of the isolated Falklanders, we are very unlikely to see any progress before a generation, as what happened in Northern Ireland concerning the daily use of violence between the belligerents.

### *Bibliography*

GUSTAFSON, Lowell Steven. *The Sovereignty Dispute over the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands*. Oxford: University Press, 1988.

NOTT, John. *Here today, gone tomorrow : Recollections of an Errant Politician*. London: Politico's Publishing, 2002.

*Operation CORPORATE 1982. The carriage of nuclear weapons by the Task Group assembled for the Falklands campaign.*

<http://www.rna-10-area.co.uk/files/corporate-nuclear.pdf> (Last checked 15 January 2013)

*The United Nations and Decolonization. Main Documents. Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.*

<http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/declaration.shtml> (Last checked 15 January 2013)

VINEN, Richard. *Thatcher's Britain : The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher era*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2009.

WOOLF, Cecil & MOORCROFT WILSON, Jean. *Authors take sides on the Falklands*. London: Cecil Woolf Publishers, 1982.

YOUNG, Hugo. *One of Us*. London: Pan Books, 1990.