

*The Malvinas/Falklands War (1982): Pacific Solutions for an Atlantic
Conflict*

Andrea Roxana Bellot

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Abstract: Although the Malvinas/Falklands War (1982) was relatively short and did not involve a great number of losses, it stands as an important blow in the collective memory of the two nations involved: Great Britain and Argentina. For the British, it was the last “colonial” war and one which allowed Margaret Thatcher to stay in power for almost a decade after the British victory. For the Argentine, it was the only war fought and lost in the twentieth century and it brought about the fall of the dictatorship. This paper will summarise the course of events related to the war, showing how the war implied a major nationalist project for both nations since national honour and national dignity were at stake. By making use of historical publications, this paper will also explore how and why some pacific solutions were ignored before the war broke out, as well as the failure of diplomatic negotiations in putting an end to the conflict.

Keywords: Malvinas/Falklands War, pacific solutions, diplomatic failure, history

Introduction

The Malvinas /Falklands war was fought in 1982 between the United Kingdom and Argentina. The reason for battle was the claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. Even though the islands have formed part of the British overseas territories since the eighteenth century, Argentina has always alleged that they belong to her national territory. This small archipelago in the South Atlantic has a reduced surface of 12.000 km² with lands that stay frozen 8 months of the year and winds that blow at 130 km/h. The total population reached the 1,800 inhabitants at the time of the war with 360 sheep per capita. How could such an *insignificant* place bring two nations to war and cause so many years of controversy? This paper aims to summarise the main events that led to

the war as well as analyse the failure in the diplomatic negotiations in preventing and stopping the armed conflict.

Historical Background and Sovereignty

The dispute over the islands certainly has a long and complicated history. The controversy, which has been going on for almost two centuries now, goes back to the discovery of the islands themselves. According to the British, Captain John Davis was the one who first sighted the islands. The Argentines tend to favour the argument that the islands were discovered by a Portuguese named Alvaro de Mesquita. Other sailors, such as Vespucci, Magellan, Sebald de Weert and Hawkins, have also been mentioned as being the first to sight the islands. There is, however, no real evidence for prioritizing one claim over another and thus, the issue is still unresolved. Consequently, Spaniards, Britons, Dutchmen and Portuguese are all possible candidates. In 1690 Captain John Strong was on an expedition to Chile when he had to stop on the islands due to a fierce storm at sea. On landing, he named the islands after the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Falkland (Hastings and Jenkins 1983: 1). Other names given to the islands were: the Sansons, the Sebaldes, Hawkins Land, the Malouines and the Malvinas (Ibid.). The first settlements on the islands were French in 1764, followed by the Spanish and thereafter the British. Around the year 1828 the Argentines established a penal colony on the islands but the British forces imposed their control over the area. The islands became a strategic point for navigation and the Royal Navy set up a base there shortly after the first colony settled. In 1829 there was an attempt to recover the islands by the government of Buenos Aires, which was easily and quickly repelled by the British. The British settled down on the islands permanently in 1833. This high interest in the possession of the islands makes sense when considering the key role islands have played in the formation of empires for international geopolitical reasons. As H. E. Chehabi argues "In the era of classical imperialism the big powers had to possess as many islands as possible, so as to control the great shipping lanes and to supply routes of their fleets" (1985: 215).

According to Hastings and Jenkins, the Falkland Islands have never been of any great strategic importance, yet, "from the moment of their discovery they seem to have embodied the national pride of whoever held them" (Hastings and Jenkins 1983: 6). The Argentines are convinced that the "Malvinas" belong to their nation, but they were taken by force by the British colonialists in 1833. In the same way, many Britons are assertive about the sovereignty of the islands. This argument is combined with the principle of self-determination: the majority of the islanders are of British descent and they passionately desire to remain British. As Margaret Thatcher declared during the war:

Argentina has, of course, long disputed British sovereignty over the islands. We have absolutely no doubt about our sovereignty, which has been continuous since 1833. Nor have we any doubt about the unequivocal wishes of the Falkland Islanders, who are British in stock and tradition, and they wish to remain British in allegiance. We cannot allow the democratic

rights of the islanders to be denied by the territorial ambitions of Argentina (quoted in Barnett 1982: 28).

Ironic as it may sound, Great Britain, the former colonial power, engages in war in order to defend the self-determination of the islanders. Those critical of the Prime Minister, such as Anthony Barnett, claim that Margaret Thatcher was demagogically using the wishes of the islanders for her own benefit (Ibid.) The argument of self-determination is disclaimed by the Argentines, who argue that any nation can set up a colony in a foreign land and later on claim that territory.

The intricacies in the discussion of sovereignty may be put aside but the fact is that, from the moment the British colonists settled on the islands in 1833, the Argentine government has made several attempts to regain the archipelago, all of them unsuccessful. In the second half of the twentieth century Argentina submitted an official report to the United Nations in which they laid claim to the islands. This led to resolution number 2065 (XX) from 16 December 1965 titled "Question of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)". It "Invites the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom to proceed without delay with the negotiations [...] bearing in mind [...] the interests of the population of the Falkland Islands". This suggestion was ignored by both nations. Further mediation from the UN followed, such as Resolution 3160 (XXVIII) and 31/49, which acknowledged the need to "concede due attention to the interests of the inhabitants of the islands" (Cardoso et al. 1983: 33). This is a key point since the UN has always considered the Falklands' case as a colonial situation, which needs to be solved with the participation of the local population. However, this has never been accepted by Argentina which wants government-level discussions with a commission formed by international members. Further debate took place in the 1960s and 1970s between the foreign missions of the two nations, but again this failed to come to any meaningful conclusion.

Going to War

Just before the breakout of war, Argentina sent the UN subtle hints of a possible invasion of the islands. The British ignored these threats and did not react as they thought that the Argentine would never dare to confront them directly. To complicate things even further, the Argentine government wrongly assumed that the British would not go to war because they inferred that Britain had lost interest in the islands. This mistaken assumption derived from two facts that had occurred during the previous years. On the one hand, the British Nationality Act was reformed in 1981, reducing considerably British citizenship rights to the inhabitants of the Falklands. On the other hand, the HMS *Endurance*, which delivered supplies to the islands, was withdrawn from service in January 1982, a few months before the beginning of the war. London did not hear the voices that warned the Foreign Office against that course of action which could lead to the interpretation that the British commitment to the Kelpers (as the islanders call themselves) was weakening. For instance, in January 1982 Admiral Sir Edmund Irving published an article titled "Does withdrawal of *Endurance* signal a Falkland Islands desertion?" in which he predicts the risks of the operation (quoted in

Chehabi 1985: 220). H. E. Chehabi blames the successive British governments for not giving top priority to the interests of the population of the islands and, as a consequence of that neglect, little was done for the development of the colony, thereby letting the infrastructure deteriorate. In 1978 he suggested a course of action for Britain's smaller possession, in which the Falkland Islands, together with other overseas dependencies, would be transformed into "overseas counties". That would have meant that the Kelpers could have gained their own representatives at Westminster, receiving the same rights as citizens of the United Kingdom. According to him, this would have put an end to colonialism, legally speaking (Chehabi 1985: 219-220).

Moreover, and following the same line of thought, Geoffrey Regan believes that the war could have been avoided if the British government had sent clear signals of a commitment with the Islands. Instead, it sent ambiguous messages giving the impression that it did not care about the fate of the Falklands (Regan 1987: 172-177; Cardoso et al. 1983: 37). The following quote summarizes the thought of the Argentine politicians:

The problem has no political importance for the United Kingdom. England does not know what to do with the Falklands. They find them expensive and far away. Those 1,800 inhabitants give them endless trouble. [Consequently,] there will be no British counterattack if the [Argentine] military action is carried out 'cleanly' (Cardoso et al. 1983: 31-32; 54).

Rosana Guber points out that the military regime governing the country at the time did not really intend to go to war. This theory, shared by Guber and others, sustains that the invasion of the islands was designed to put pressure on the British government since that would have enabled the Argentine to raise the discussion entailing international organizations (Guber 2001: 29).

The absence of serious, constant and effective diplomatic talks increased the tension among the two nations and gave way to misleading presuppositions. On 19 March 1982, the Argentine flag was raised at South Georgia (a Falklands dependency) by a group of Argentines who were sent to work on the islands, in a somewhat confusing incident that was interpreted by the British authorities as a hostile move. The Junta ordered the invasion of the islands on 2 April. The operation was quick and the British garrison surrendered the same day. Along with an early British military reaction of making the decision of sending a Task Force alongside a submarine to the South Atlantic, in the following weeks there was intense diplomatic activity while the main expeditionary force assembled and sailed towards the area of conflict. In the meantime, Argentine forces on the islands were being reinforced, reaching a total number of 10.000 troops. The British counterattack began with the retaking of South Georgia (21-26 April) and the bombing of the local airport at Stanley, followed by the crucial sinking of the ARA *General Belgrano* (2 May). Argentine air attacks hit and sunk British destroyers HMS *Sheffield* (4 May), *Ardent* (21 May), *Coventry* and *Atlantic Conveyor* (25 May). British forces advanced eastwards across the island while the Argentines prepared to defend Stanley, the Falklands' capital city. The final serious land battle took place between 11 and 13 June around the mountains surrounding the capital. On 14 June, British forces reached the outskirts of Stanley. The Argentines still had some 8.000 troops and

supplies there, but their morale was diminishing. As a consequence, Argentine commanders agreed to negotiate the surrender on the evening of the 15 June. Repeated mistakes due to disorganisation, poor military strategy together with a severe lack of training and weapons made Argentina lose the war (Regan 1987: 172-173; Guber 2001: 112).

Reasons for War

As regards the reasons for going to war, the official version given by both nations was that it was a “just cause”. That is to say, both countries affirmed to have right over the possession of the islands since they believed the islands formed part of their national territory. The Argentines have always claimed that the islands were inherited from Spain after the Independence of 1816 but were taken from them by the British who, on the other hand, felt obliged to defend their colonial subjects from any outside aggression. Moreover, the British could not allow themselves to be threatened by a dictatorial regime, since that would have made Thatcher’s government look weak and therefore lose ground in international politics. As Barnett claims, “her political image had been constructed around the projection of determination, resolution and iron fidelity to national defence” (1982: 29). Argentine leaders also considered geopolitical reasons. In 1980, Chile had won the dispute over the Beagle Channel, so there was a growing concern about the strategic position of Argentina in South America. Besides, some members of the Argentine government believed that there was a big potential for exploiting the natural resources on the area, such as krill fishing and oil (Linford 2005: 3).

Another important factor to take into account is that both countries had been going through severe crises by the time war broke out and there was a great deal of public unhappiness, unrest and censorship. Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party, was British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990. She had been preceded by James Callaghan from the Labour Party, whose government had been extremely unpopular resulting in the union strikes of 1978-1979, which forced him to call for general elections in 1979. When Thatcher took power, she was determined to counteract what she perceived as the national decline: social unrest, high inflation and unemployment. She believed that “the years of managed decline were the real testament to the ills of the British economy and the necessity to try a new approach” (Pearce & Stewart 1992:522). Besides, she wanted the nation to recover leadership in international affairs.

The main policies implemented in her presidency were deregulation of the financial sector, privatization of national companies, flexible labour markets, and a reduction of the budget for social services and education. All these measurements brought about a deep recession of the economy; “the tight fiscal policies and very high interest rates were maintained through the period 1979-82 and Britain experienced its fiercest recession since 1931” (Ibid.:523). Unemployment stood as one of the main consequences of this recession. By 1982, it had risen to three million, the highest number since the 1930s, affecting especially the manufacturing sector and the mining industry, which was the initial cause of the many confrontations between the Trade Unions and the Prime Minister. At the same time, social unrest was growing and there was a new outbreak of violence in some of the major cities around Britain. Examples were the Brixton riots in April 1981 and the Toxteth riots in July 1981. To make matters

worse, Margaret Thatcher was rather intolerant with the complaints of the population, and ordered police repression for public demonstrations. Due to these measures she became famous for her resolute approach which later on gave her the nickname “Iron Lady”. As a consequence of all this, Margaret Thatcher reached the lowest rates of popularity at that time.

By the time of the war the leader of the military government ruling Argentina was General Galtieri, who could only manage to stay in power for one year. This National Reorganization Process, an umbrella term by which the dictators called themselves, came to power in 1976 by a military coup deposing President Isabel Martínez de Perón. She was the widow of the former President Juan Domingo Perón, leader of the popular “peronist” political and social movement, who inherited the presidency once her husband had passed away in office. The Junta immediately abolished the national constitution, depriving the citizens of most of their fundamental civil rights: soon it was also announced that the Death Penalty was to be re-established. Although Argentina had already suffered under other military regimes, this was considered to be the worst dictatorship in Argentina (Corradi 1996: 92), a *Dirty War* that violated human rights and which resulted in thirty thousand political activists “disappearing”, according to the CONADEP (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas).

Apart from the atrocities to human rights that were being committed and the corruption that invaded even the highest ranks of the government, the country was going through a devastating economic crisis. By 1981 the inflation rate rose to 100 per cent, foreign debt climbed to its highest records, deindustrialization rate reached 22.9 per cent, net salaries decreased by 19.2 per cent, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) fell by 11.4 per cent and the national currency collapsed at rates of 600 per cent (Floria 1988: 245-252; Rock 1988: 459-461; Romero 2001: 212-216). Moreover, popular opposition was at its peak and civil rights movements, such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, were managing to claim international attention. The recovery of the Malvinas Islands was a good card for the President to play at that moment. On the one hand, an eventual Argentine victory would help to counteract the national chaos. On the other hand, it would somehow legitimize the military government (Canelo 2004: 304-305; Guber 2001: 19). So, in a way, both nations needed the war to mask the troubles at home. Consequently, the war was used to raise nationalist feelings and thus unite public opinion against a common outside enemy by creating an “us/them” dichotomy. The two governments, led by Thatcher and Galtieri, used this dichotomy to displace the attention of those who were unhappy, unemployed, discriminated against or repressed.

The war lasted 74 days and left behind a total of 907 dead. After the war, the British presence on the islands was reinforced and some important British figures, such as the Prince of Wales and Thatcher herself, visited the islands. In 1983, the British Nationality Falkland Islands Act was passed, giving back full citizenship rights to the inhabitants of the islands. Thatcher’s popularity rose after the British victory: from being considered the most unpopular of British Prime Ministers, she managed to become the most popular one (Marr 2010). She was re-elected in 1983 by a huge majority, successfully channelling the high public support of this reawakened nationalist mood into the polls. The Conservatives were 188 seats ahead of Labour and had an overall majority of 144 constituencies. The Labour Party recorded its worst performance since 1918, obtaining only 27.6% of the popular vote (Pearce and Stewart 1992: 526).

As Malcolm Pearce and Geoffrey Stewart said: “The dark days of the Falkland war were over and the country could rejoice in its recent victory, and feel that Britain’s prestige had risen under the stern and unyielding leadership of Mrs. Thatcher” (Pearce and Stewart 1992: 525). In Argentina, General Galtieri resigned shortly after the war, on 17 June 1982, and he was also forced to leave his position of Commander-in-Chief of the Army. In the following year, 1983, the dictatorship collapsed and democracy was restored. The fall of Galtieri and, in consequence, the fall of the military government, was not only because the war had been lost but also because the people of Argentina realised the serious mistakes committed by the regime and its incapacity to solve the internal and external conflicts. The armed forces had lost all credibility and the fall of the military Junta was inevitable.

Failure of Diplomatic Negotiations

There were several attempts to try and reach a peaceful solution after the invasion and just before the British counterattack. The first intervention came from the USA by President Reagan and his Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig. Reagan’s intervention was well received in the UK and in Argentina. On 7 April 1982 the national newspaper, the *Clarín*, welcomed the news and published the following in its editorial:

La propuesta del presidente norteamericano Ronald Reagan de interponer sus buenos oficios a fin de lograr una solución pacífica en el pleito que la Argentina sostiene con el Reino Unido por la reconquista de las islas Malvinas [...] constituye una novedad de sumo interés [...] (Clarín, 7/4/1982).

[U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s proposal to make good use of his office in order to obtain a peaceful settlement of the dispute that Argentina maintains with the United Kingdom over the control of the Falkland Islands [...] is very interesting and is to be welcomed.]

President Reagan’s proposal to put his good skills to work to find a peaceful solution to the lawsuit between Argentina and the UK for the recovery of the Malvinas Islands is of great interest. However, Haig’s peace plans were rejected by Argentina because they failed to guarantee that sovereignty was to be eventually granted. On the 30th of April, Haig declared:

We had reasons to believe that the United Kingdom would consider an agreement along the lines of our proposal, but Argentina informed us yesterday that she could not accept it. The position of Argentina continues to be that she must receive present assurances of her eventual sovereignty, or else an extension of the *de facto* role concerning the government of the islands (Cardoso et al 1983: 245).

He recalled the “extraordinary effort” made by the United States in their role of mediators in trying to reach a peaceful agreement in an attempt to preserve “human

lives and international order". He also warned that the crisis was about to "enter a new and dangerous phase during which it [was] probable that military action on a large scale [would] take place" (Ibid.). The Argentine refusal moved the USA to abandon their neutral stance and take sides with the British, announcing economic and military sanctions on Argentina. President Reagan went even further when, from the White House, he told reporters that he considered Argentina to be the "true aggressor" (Ibid: 217).

The second international intervention came along with the initiative of the President of Peru, Fernando Belaunde Terry. He set out a seven point peace plan, point one and two being the immediate cessation of hostilities and mutual withdrawal of forces (Cardoso et al 1983: 219-220). Although there were some initial disagreements, both nations were about to accept it. However, the controversial sinking of the *Belgrano*, torpedoed by the British navy when it was outside the war zone (2 May), caused the peace proposal to backfire. There has been some speculation as to whether the *Belgrano* was then a military or a political target. By 8 May the war became the only alternative as negotiations were going through a weak phase. At this point, Britain sent reinforcements to the South Atlantic. Two factors contributed to the strengthening of the British position. On the one hand, the international support the UK received from the NATO and the USA. On the other hand, the internal support the Conservative Party obtained due to the victory in the Town Council elections on 7 May in England (La Vanguardia, 8 May 1982).

Thereafter came the intervention of the UN, led by its Secretary General, the Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuéllar. He collected the points for discussion that both nations were willing to offer in order to negotiate an agreement, while battle continued on the islands. The UK demanded the creation of a local council on the islands, accepted to withdraw the troops in a fortnight (providing that Argentina did the same), but refused to talk about sovereignty. Argentina, aware of the fact that most Falklanders wished to remain British, responded that the council should be formed by members of the UN and not by local people. It also asked for free access to settle on the islands (La Vanguardia, 19 May 1982). Britain rejected Argentine claims, broke off negotiations and commenced its final attack towards the end of May: that is, on 21 May 1982.

A recent UN resolution adopted by the Special Committee at its ninth meeting on 18 June 2004 "requests the Governments of Argentina and the UK to consolidate the current process of dialogue and cooperation through the resumption of negotiations in order to find, as soon as possible, a peaceful solution". Now (December 2011), 29 years after the war, there is still confrontation between the two nations over the same issues and the basis of the conflict remains substantially unsolved. The claims presented by Argentina are based on the concept of territorial integrity while Britain focuses on the islanders' wishes and vigorously proclaims her commitment to defend them against any aggression. This is shown by the continuous presence of a combined naval, air force and army deployment on the islands. In 2010, the British government threatened to use military force if needed to protect the search for oil reservoir around the islands. This prompted a hostile Argentine reaction in the form of transit restrictions for the ships involved (El País, 28/2/2010). Even more recently, in June 2011, the conservative government declared that there was no possibility for negotiations as long as the will of the islanders was to remain British. President Cristina Fernández responded by calling

David Cameron "arrogant" and qualifying his words as "mediocre and stupid" (*El País*, 17/6/2011; *El Periódico*, 18/6/2011).

Conclusion

The central problem of the whole conflict revolves around the notion of sovereignty. In his article "Sovereignty and the Falklands Crisis" (1983), Peter Calvert analyses the complexity of the legal issues connected to the sovereignty of the islands. He concludes that "the claims on both sides are based on historical facts that are by turn vague, confused and disputed, and if there is to be any resolution of the question a great deal of homework will have to be done first by both parties" (Calvert 1983: 405). Moreover, the several peace plans proposed by international mediation failed due to the fact that they were unable to bring a solution to the issue of sovereignty. Argentina rejected the pacific solutions proposed at the time of war because they failed to grant the discussion about the dominion of the territory. Britain keeps avoiding this issue and insists that the power to decide should be given to the inhabitants of the islands. All in all, this old dispute for the Malvinas/Falkland islands has become utterly symbolic for both nations. Although the probabilities of a solution in the near future are doubtful, the possibility of another war is also unlikely.

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Andrea Roxana Bellot is working on her doctoral thesis at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona. She holds a degree in English Philology from the University of Barcelona and completed the Masters' programme "Cultural Studies: Texts & Contexts" in the URV. Her interests are mainly in cultural studies, war studies, national identity and the media. Andrea was born in Argentina, but lives in Catalonia since 2005.