



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor), Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

Argentine–British Dispute over Falklands

by Bartłomiej Znojek

Relations between Argentina and the United Kingdom have become aggravated following the launch by a British company of oil drilling off the coasts of the Falklands. British government is adamant in defending the territory's present status and refusing to yield to Argentine demands for negotiations on the islands' sovereignty.

Argentina's claims to the Falklands (which it calls Malvinas) date back to 1833, when the islands were taken over by Great Britain. In 1982, the military junta ruling Argentina at the time made an unsuccessful attempt to seize control of the disputed territory, sparking the so-called Falklands War. The defeat at the hands of the British forces was the prime cause behind the junta's fall, but successive Argentine governments did not renounce their claims to the disputed area and were calling for the start of the islands' status negotiations.

The present crises in Argentine-British relations has been triggered by the oil drilling operations which the British company Desire Petroleum started north of the Falklands last February. Argentina perceives the UK government's decision on starting oil extraction on the disputed area as violation of international commitments specified in UN General Assembly and Committee on Decolonisation resolutions. These documents, though, are not legally binding. In response to the drilling activity, the Argentine government imposed shipping restrictions on the routes between Argentina and the Falklands. However, it ruled out the use of force, asking on 24 February for mediation by the UN Secretary-General.

Argentina's reaction is underpinned mainly by economic and political motives. The Falkland oil and gas fields would give the country important financial benefits and prestige, just as has been the case with Brazil and its recently discovered offshore oil fields. Starting drill activity close to the Falklands gave Argentina an opportunity to reiterate its claims to the islands and press the UK for negotiations about the territory's status. Possibly, the Argentine government wants to make use of the dispute domestically (in the expectation of increased public support) and strengthen the country's position in Latin America.

The UK government insists that the drilling operations comply with international law and that Argentina can take part in Falkland field exploitation. They, though, refuse to negotiate the islands' sovereignty, referring primarily to the right to self-determination of peoples. The Falkland Islands are a self-governing overseas territory of the UK, with British citizenship held by 90% of its nearly 3,000 inhabitants (according to a 2006 census), and with no secessionist movement in existence.

Due to their geographical position and the stationing of nearly 1,700 troops, the Falklands have a strategic importance for the British government. The UK will also be unwilling to forego the expected profits from the Falkland oil and gas extraction. Another consideration is that any concessions on the islands' sovereignty may weaken British position in other territorial disputes, e.g. with Spain over Gibraltar. A firm stand on the Falklands may also boost public support for the ruling Labour party in the lead-up to this year's general election.

Argentina's position is weak on legal grounds, and its attempts to internationalise the Falklands status dispute will not impel the UK to concede. So far, the only support the Argentine government has received is from Latin American countries. Argentina is unlikely to abandon its territorial claims, even in exchange for access to Falkland fields exploitation, but this will not affect the international status of the Falkland Islands.