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What Threat does Argentina Currently Pose to the Falklands?

Is Argentina militarily strong enough to assault the Falkland Islands anytime soon? Neil Thompson doesn't think so. But that doesn't mean that Buenos Aires can't launch an aggressive 'lawfare' campaign to undermine the United Kingdom's sovereignty over the Islands.

By Neil Thompson for ISN

Argentina recently succeeded in persuading the UN Special Committee on Decolonization to call for further negotiations with the United Kingdom over the status of the Falkland Islands. In doing so, Buenos Aires has succeeded in persuading committee members to ignore the results of a referendum [conducted](#) by the local Falklands population in 2013 that voted overwhelmingly to remain an overseas UK territory. Argentina maintains that the issue is one of UK occupation of sovereign Argentine territory, so the islanders' opinions are moot under international law.

Since neither [Argentina](#) nor [Britain](#) are economically or militarily strong enough to afford a war over the Islands, the risk of formal interstate conflict remains low. However, this does not guarantee the Islands' future as a British overseas territory. The UK's geopolitical position vis-à-vis many other states has dramatically weakened since 1982, leaving Argentina in a better position to further its policy goals. In this respect, Buenos Aires might choose to launch an aggressive postmodern "lawfare" campaign of economic, legal and diplomatic sabotage to delegitimize the UK's administration of the islands. Like Russia's current involvement in the Ukraine crisis, Argentina's attempts to destabilize the Falkland Islands would occur below the level of open war.

Rule Britannia?

But would this 'campaign' ultimately result in the end of the Islands' status as a British overseas territory? The UK certainly does not command the same level of hard and soft power that it had back in 1982. Indeed, the 2008 financial crisis merely completed what the 'war on terror' begun, debilitating the country's military machine and the economic engine any modern state needs to project power and influence over others. Britain is also going through a period of tense relations with its European Union partners and faces an uncertain future as a [united](#) political entity. Consequently, London's ability to shield the Islands from their giant neighbor is correspondingly diminished.

This is particularly significant given that many South American states not only sympathize with Argentina's point of view but have also become far more important actors on the world stage. The UK has no real remaining regional allies in South America, a continent with dim views of the former

European colonial powers. There is also a generational issue. Many key figures in contemporary Latin American politics, such as current Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, remember when Britain provided support to the [repressive dictatorships](#) that they grew up in. London's relations with the Pinochet regime in Chile, for example, were particularly close until the return of democracy there in 1990. Now, Latin America is run by self-confident democracies, not pliable dictatorships in need of outside support to bolster their rule. Britain is therefore kept isolated in South America by its past associations for many Latin Americans.

Malvinas Argentina's?

However Buenos Aires is by no means in the best shape to [capitalize](#) upon British weaknesses. Argentina's government remains preoccupied by economic difficulties, rising inflation and foreign litigation. For instance, a recent ruling by an American court determined that the country must pay a group of "vulture funds" the full amount of their defaulted loans – an order that threatens already scarce foreign currency reserves.

Yet, parlous economic conditions and popular unrest did not stop Argentina's last military junta from [invading](#) the Falkland Islands in 1982. Instead, reclaiming the Malvinas helped to distract the Argentine public from its disastrous economic policies. Consequently, if Argentinean politics were once again to become destabilized by economic difficulties, it is not hard to see a case where a populist government comes to power with a nationalist worldview that is once again committed to "recovering" the Falklands. Coercive gestures towards the Islands could easily become a substitute for hard economic reforms or their "price". For instance, Argentina could easily unilaterally escalate the crisis on the ground by sending an exploratory [oil rig](#) with a naval escort to drill inside the Falklands [maritime](#) boundary. Alternatively, it could try to undermine the Islands [economically](#) with a blockade.

Which undoubtedly begs the question, what kind of military threat does Argentina pose to the Falkland Islands today? The [Global Firepower](#) website ranks Argentina in lowly 55th place, behind the likes of the Netherlands, Belarus and Ukraine. And despite its ongoing economic travails, the UK remains among the world's leading military powers thanks to the \$53.6 billion it spends on defense, compared to Argentina's \$4.3 billion. Moreover, the UK's helicopters, aircraft and submarine capabilities [significantly](#) outnumber and outclass their Argentine equivalents. To further compound matters, Argentina's armed forces are still equipped with outdated technology from the 1970s and 80s, whereas the UK has significantly improved its quality and capabilities since 1982. UK forces are also significantly battle-hardened from recent conflicts in the Middle East and Asia.

The only major vulnerability facing the UK's armed forces is its current lack of aircraft carriers. Currently, Britain only has one carrier in active service which, in the context of the Falklands conflict, would be especially vulnerable to advances in anti-ship missile technology since 1982. Yet, with a significant military presence on the Islands since the end of the conflict, coupled with advances in surveillance and satellite technology, London can nevertheless rest assured that a surprise Argentine invasion remains highly unlikely.

But would this be enough to stop a populist government in Buenos Aires from capitalizing upon nationalist sentiment? Many analysts hold Argentina's special-forces in high-regard and believe that they are capable of launching covert strikes against the Islands. Yet, even if such strikes were to succeed, it would still be extremely difficult for Argentina's armed forces to hold the Islands and, indeed, reinforce and resupply them. Given the parlous state of Argentina's navy especially, this idea makes no military sense. But as a public relations gesture to rally regional support for itself against Britain, a clash could easily be spun as a moral victory.

Around the World

So while Buenos Aires could make life very difficult for the Falkland Islands, its bid to return them to Argentinian legal jurisdiction nevertheless remains reliant upon the support of fellow Latin American states and international patronage for the foreseeable future. At present, these parties are happy to make sympathetic noises. However, genuine Latin American support does not extend much beyond symbolic gestures like supporting the UN vote or blocking Falklands-flagged ships from [docking](#) at ports. This could change, for example, if Brazil resumed its campaign for a permanent seat on the Security Council and used the issue to put pressure on the UK.

In addition, the UN Decolonisation Committee remains a deeply unsympathetic forum for British interests. With Russia, China and non-aligned states such as India *and* Brazil as members, the UK has no natural allies within this forum. While London remains free to ignore or veto its resolutions, by repeatedly doing so it nevertheless provides Buenos Aires with a useful and highly symbolic pretext for any actions short of war that it chooses to take to “enforce its sovereignty” over the Falkland Islands, such as sending over a flotilla of unarmed ships full of civilians to “reclaim” them.

Back to the Future?

Indeed, emphasizing ‘actions short of war’ to break the Falklands stand-off is particularly important given the current political climate in Argentina. It’s the only option Buenos Aires has in the absence of a superior local military presence, a friendly local populace and a disorganized opponent of the type that allowed Russia to “peacefully” occupy and subsequently annex Crimea earlier this year. Yet, the legal and moral threat that Argentina could pose might prove effective - if it is accompanied by a propaganda campaign that resonates with all the right sections of the international community. “Delegitimization” could make the economic and political costs so prohibitive that the UK determines that it no longer makes sense to maintain its sovereignty over the Islands.

Under this worst case scenario, a “[Diego Garcia](#)” situation could occur where, under the aegis of the UN, the “implanted” British population is removed and evacuated back to the UK. The administration of the Falkland Islands would then pass to Buenos Aires, a move that is unlikely to sit comfortably with most of the British public. Yet, with tact and sound diplomatic skills, the transfer might acquire the veneer of legalism that state conductors of “lawfare” rely upon to win international acquiescence for their actions.

There are plausible modern precedents for the surrender of overseas territories with large citizen populations. In 1962 then-President Charles De Gaulle gave up the three French overseas territorial “départements” in what is now Algeria. These had been regarded as an integral part of France up to that moment. Almost a million European Algerians (Pied Noirs) fled to mainland France afterwards, and today there is no significant French population in Algeria. The Falkland Islands had no indigenous population for Britain to mistreat the way the French did native Algerians, so the parallels here are not exact. Yet, from a legal standpoint it could be argued there are similarities between the two situations. When France retreated from Algeria, it did so because it was widely seen as having lost the “battle of ideas” against nationalist opponents, not the military conflict. Britain must not rest on its laurels and allow the same to happen with Argentina.

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