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Tensions Continue Thirty Years after War between Argentina and Great Britain

by Andrés Gaudín

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Two months before the 30th anniversary of the start of the Falklands/Malvinas War, British Prime Minister David Cameron's administration began a dangerous escalation of tension that brought memories of the early morning of April 2, 1982, when Argentine troops landed on the South Atlantic islands to begin an unsuccessful military operation that ended, 73 days later, with hundreds of young conscripts dead and the signing of a humiliating unconditional surrender.

At that time, the Argentine dictators felt that the foundations of the bloody regime established March 24, 1976, were cracking, and they imagined that regaining sovereignty over the Malvinas—a longstanding claim of Argentine society—could become a unifying factor that would enable them to stay in power. During those years, Argentina was a country consumed by crisis, in debt, with industry destroyed and high unemployment, especially among youth. Discontent reigned.

Since the end of the dictatorship in December 1983, successive constitutional governments have persisted in the claim of sovereignty over the Malvinas, but they always channeled their actions through the UN, calling for a solution through dialogue.

British government steps up rhetoric

Today, it is the London government that is tightening the screws and ordering a series of actions that Argentine Prime Minister Héctor Timerman called "provocative." These actions have included reinforcing the military presence on the islands and even mentioning the desirability of positioning a nuclear submarine in the South Atlantic waters.

Everyone from former diplomats during the time of the dictatorship to political analysts and government and opposition politicians is asking if it is the critical situation of the declining British economy—with its crippled industrial sectors and 2.7 million unemployed (including 22.3% of those under 24 years of age)—that has led Cameron to "turn to a pathetic demonstration of power inappropriate in times of peace," as Argentine Vice President Amado Boudou said.

Prince William, heir to the British thrown, must complete his military training and has elected to do so in the Falklands. He will spend six weeks on the islands. Since his final exercises will begin during February, perhaps it would have been wise to not choose this place, especially because April 2 will mark the three-decade anniversary of the start of that absurd war.

South American support for Argentina solid

Although in Argentina there were negative comments regarding the selection, the administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner did not pass judgment. Amid this deafening silence, on Dec. 15, Uruguay ratified a measure that it had taken in September 2010, which bars any British warship en route to the Malvinas and any merchant ship flying the flag of the islands from entering its ports. The latter measure was taken not only in solidarity with Argentina but also because the Falklands are not a nation and to recognize the legality of a ship flying that flag would be to tacitly
accept a nonexistent sovereignty. Uruguay has always said that the Malvinas are Argentine territory and has expressed that sentiment in international forums.

New problems ensued. The British government called in Uruguay's Ambassador to London Néstor Moreira Morán to demand "explanations" and to express its "great concern" at the Montevideo government's action. Simultaneously, in the Uruguayan capital, British Ambassador Patrick Mullee released an arrogant communiqué asking Foreign Minister Luis Almagro for a meeting and demanding an "urgent" response regarding the "potentially very worrying" decision by the Uruguayan government. The note added, in a threatening way, that London was "carefully considering our next steps" and said that "nor we or the Falklands will yield to those pretending to intimidate or blackmail the islands."

Uruguay's representative in London and the foreign minister responded in the same vein, with a paragraph from a posting by President José Mujica on the Presidencia de la República Web page: "A political determination exists that does not allow ships to enter Uruguayan ports that fly the illegal flag of the Malvinas, whose sovereignty is claimed by Argentina with the support of Uruguay." The responses clarified that "all merchant ships (not military vessels) with the English flag can enter the port, the same as those of any other country."

Two days later, on Dec. 20, the four presidents of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERSOCUR) countries met in Montevideo and ratified their commitment to the Argentine sovereignty claim, but they particularly backed the Uruguayan decision and agreed that ships with the Falklands flag could not enter any MERCOSUR port.

That was followed by the solidarity of the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR). That is all of South America—something the London government seems not to have considered, since this time countries that backed Britain during the 1982 war, such as some former British colonies and Chile, supported the Argentine claim.

Andrés Chadwick, official spokesman for Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, was clear: "There is no problem recognizing a ship that flies the British flag or the flag of any other country, but we cannot recognize a ship with the flag of a state that, in Chile's judgment, is not a state, because the Malvinas is simply a British colonial possession."

**British press criticizes Cameron**

"Perhaps worn down by critical reality, as were the Argentine dictators who unleashed the war in 1982, Cameron opted for insulting language and some attitudes that were almost belligerent," said Alberto Dearriba, an analyst with the daily Tiempo Argentino in his Jan. 21 column.

The British press was also hard on its government. On Dec. 23, Richard Gott wrote in The Guardian that Cameron is "asleep" in the face of the new reality. The editorial writer of the London paper called for a dialogue to be established regarding the islands' sovereignty and said that the British government has to see that "South America is growing in strength and increasingly united. Britain must wake up to this new reality."

Three weeks later, on Jan. 18, it was the turn of Camilla Swift of the conservative weekly The Spectator. The analyst criticized Cameron's militaristic threats and asked "how far that 'strong message' will extend…with defense cuts trimming our forces day by day."
The Economist also referred to the British government's "lack of analytical ability" and reminded Cameron, "In 2010 Hillary Clinton, America’s secretary of state, called for talks over the dispute, a contrast to 1982 when the United States backed Britain."

In the verbal escalation—in which he incredibly referred to Argentina's "colonialism"—Cameron forgot that 10 of the 16 conflicts studied by the UN Special Committee on Decolonization have Great Britain as the country responsible for carrying out colonial practices.

**Prime minister doubles down**

Since mid-December 2011, the prime minister has taken actions that worry the international community. First, he reiterated that Prince William would finish his military training in the Falklands on a particularly ill-advised date. Next, during a report on the employment crisis before the House of Commons, Cameron inserted the Falklands issue and did not dismiss a suggestion from the former head of the Royal Navy Lord Alan West to "send a nuclear submarine to the South Atlantic so they can see how committed we are to protecting the islands."

Just hours later, Cameron ratified oil-exploration concessions in waters claimed by Argentina (in mid-2011, the company Rockhopper Exploration had revealed findings "likely to be commercially viable" in four areas north of the islands: Sea Lion, Casper, Beverly, and Casper South), and he announced that a new oil rig would begin operations near the 200-mile Argentine continental shelf in early February.

On Jan. 19, Cameron called an "emergency" meeting of the National Security Council and announced that he had just approved a "military contingency plan," which implied deploying more troops. Finally, on Jan. 24, Great Britain went to the extreme of preventing 3,600 passengers from various countries aboard the cruise ship Star Princess from disembarking in Port Stanley on their trip to visit the islands. The ship had fulfilled all the sanitary protocols in Argentina and Chile, but British authorities on the islands said that, two weeks earlier, 20 passengers had had intestinal problems, which presented the risk of an epidemic.

The islands form an archipelago 480 km east of the Argentine Patagonia. They include two large islands and some 200 smaller islands that comprise an area of just over 12,100 sq km. The British have occupied the islands since 1833. The population is 3,120, 90% of whom are British citizens. London has 1,100 military personnel deployed there—without counting the reinforcements announced by Cameron—a ratio of approximately one soldier for every three civilian residents. Besides fishing and oil resources, the islands are strategic for Great Britain because of their proximity to the Antarctic Continent.

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