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Thirty-three years after the start of Argentina’s war with Great Britain over the disputed Islas Malvinas/Falkland Islands, a strategic South Atlantic territory that the Crown has occupied for nearly two centuries (since 1833), the two countries are once again facing off, only this time in a diplomatic rather than military sense.

Argentina, with nearly unanimous backing from the international community, accuses the European power of refusing to adhere to 40 UN resolutions obliging the two countries to resolve their competing claims through dialogue. The government in Buenos Aires is also upset by what it describes as a series of "grotesque provocations" by Great Britain. The offenses include Britain’s decision to substantially increase its military budget for the "defense of the islands," evidence of espionage that was leaked by former National Security Agency (NSA) agent Edward Snowden and reported by the US online news site The Intercept, and concessions that British authorities issued allowing a group of oil companies to prospect in the disputed maritime territory and eventually extract oil there (NotiSur, June 25, 2010).

The issues that have come to light in recent months—between March and June—coincide with the anniversary of Argentina’s failed attempt, starting April 2, 1982, to occupy the Malvinas. The misadventure was ordered by the country’s civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983) and cost the lives of nearly 1,000 young Argentines (NotiSur, Jan. 17, 2003). It ended, 10 weeks after it began, with an "unconditional surrender."

On March 24, the anniversary of the 1976 coup that launched what would prove to be Argentina’s bloodiest dictatorship since 1930, British Secretary of State for Defense Michael Fallon announced that the government of conservative Prime Minister David Cameron had decided to boost its military budget for the Falkland Islands, as the Malvinas are known in Britain, by US$277 million. The top official said that Argentina poses "a very live threat" to British security. "We have to respond to it," he said. Fallon said the budget increase was motivated in particular by unconfirmed reports that Argentina may lease a squadron of Russian fighter planes. Authorities in Buenos Aires say no such rearmament plans are in place.

Argentine Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman responded by saying that Britain’s "disproportionate increase in military spending and claims of a supposed and implausible Argentine threat are an open provocation." Timerman made the argument in letters sent to the UN, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the Group of 77 and China, and the countries that have accompanied Argentina’s sovereignty claims over the Malvinas.

President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner also addressed the issue, dismissing Fallon’s announcement as the kind of thing "certain leaders do … to respond to the weapons lobby or to win elections they don’t know how to win otherwise."
Late last month, Timerman traveled to New York to participate in a debate held by the UN’s Special Committee on Decolonization. During the encounter he reminded his fellow participants that 50 years earlier, on June 25, 1965, the UN approved Resolution 2065, which recognized the Islas Malvinas as a case of colonialism. He also recalled that the decision was ratified by 40 subsequent resolutions, all indicating that Great Britain must meet its obligation to sit down with Argentina and negotiate the latter’s sovereignty claims. The British government, nevertheless, "stands by its colonial policy as if it were a badge of honor," Timerman said.

Of the 16 colonialism cases being dealt with by the Special Committee on Decolonization, 10 directly involve the UK. These territories, all of them islands, have become tax havens or centers for making counterfeit stamps for the lucrative philately market.

**British isolation**

Timerman and Argentine Defense Minister Agustín Rossi both argue that London is increasingly isolated with regard to the Malvinas. "Even in Great Britain a considerable part of the population now considers it indispensible to establish a mature dialogue. And, in the world as a whole, more and more countries support Argentina," said Timerman.

As an example of changing opinions in Britain, the foreign minister pointed to a Feb. 14 opinion piece in The Mirror written by former deputy prime minister John Prescott (1997-2007) of the Labour Party. In the article, Prescott accused London of employing a double standard regarding its colonial holdings and the people who live there. He recalled how, more than 40 years ago, Britain leased an island in the Chagos archipelago to the US so that the latter could use it as an air base.

"Nearly 2,000 Chagossians were scared off the islands and then forced to live as second-class citizens in Mauritius after having their pet dogs rounded up and gassed," he wrote. The people of the Falklands, in contrast, "were granted a referendum on whether to stay British and they’re white," Prescott pointed out. The Labour leader also noted that, since 1982, Britain has spent more than 1 billion GBP (US$1.5 billion) on the approximately 2,000 people who live there—equivalent to more than US$750,000 each.

Defense Minister Rossi, proud of his country’s commitment to negotiation rather than confrontation, believes London’s growing isolation on the issue improves the possibility that the two sides will eventually sit down and talk. Argentina’s position is particularly strengthened, he said, by the unanimous support it enjoys from the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, including from former British colonies that are now in the Commonwealth of Nations (NotiSur, Feb. 15, 2013).

**Oil and gas discoveries**

Another pressing concern for Argentina is the possibility that the disputed maritime territory around the Malvinas could soon be used for oil production (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2010). A consortium of three British and two US companies chose April 2, the precise anniversary of the outbreak of the Malvinas/Falklands War, to announce the discovery of oil and gas in waters 200 km north of the islands. The area is under Argentine jurisdiction. British authorities, nevertheless, granted concessions there for exploration and extraction. The companies involved are Premier Oil, Falkland Oil and Gas, Rockhopper, Noble Energy, and Edison International.
Prior to the announcement, Argentina had registered complaints with international bodies and the London and New York stock exchanges, denouncing the five multinationals for involving themselves in the "exploration and extraction of resources in areas under Argentine sovereignty."

The government had also warned that it would begin enforcing updated rules in the Ley de Hidrocarburos regarding prison sentences and fines for companies and company directors involved in illegal operations. The law, amended in 2013, establishes that unauthorized operations are punishable by jail sentences of up to 15 years and fines equivalent to the value of 1.5 million barrels of oil. In addition, companies engaging in such activities can be banned for 20 years from operating in Argentine territory. The companies in question include the aforementioned consortium, as well the firm Ocean Rig, which owns the prospecting platform that Rockhopper, Noble Energy, and their partners hired out.

**Operation QUITO**

It was also revealed on April 2, via the Web site The Intercept, that London—fearing another Argentine military incursion in the Malvinas/Falklands (something no post-dictatorship government has considered)—used a shadowy unit called the Joint Threat Research and Intelligence Group (JTRIG) to spy on Argentine civilian and military leaders and plan offensive cyberoperations to manipulate public opinion. The plan was known, oddly enough, as Operation QUITO (even though Quito is a city in Ecuador, a separate South American country), according to The Intercept.

The Web site based its story on top-secret information leaked by Snowden and pertains to the years 2008-2011, meaning it was developed during the conservative Cameron government but launched during the Labour administration of Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2007-2010). The documents refer to the mission as a "long-running, large scale, pioneering effects operation" and indicate that Argentina is Britain’s principal point of interest in Latin America. They also reveal that, despite the apparently hands-off position that US President Barack Obama maintains regarding the Falkland Islands sovereignty dispute, the NSA cooperated with the British spy agency Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

The US news site explained that development of Operation QUITO began in 2008 and was "almost complete" as of 2009. The plan called for tactics such as spreading misinformation via social networks and intercepting military and security communications. The goal was to stay on top of Argentine plans regarding the Malvinas/Falklands, and to influence Argentine and regional opinions on the matter.

The activities are also a way to support wider objectives of the Foreign Office, which is committed to "preventing Argentina from taking over the Falkland Islands," according to The Intercept. The information provided by Snowden shows, furthermore, that Britain’s intelligence operations are not limited to Argentina alone and that the British government is concerned about growing support for Argentina’s claim among other countries in the region. The article quotes material from a 2011 GCHQ workshop stating that "GCHQ has consistently underperformed on Brazil, with growing concerns that South American attitudes on the Falklands are swinging behind Argentina. A forthcoming ministerial visit to Chile provides an opportunity to counter the trend. The Foreign Office are looking for advice."