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Argentina Protests British Build-up in the Malvinas/ Falkland Islands

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After a year of complicated relations with Great Britain, a complaint was raised in the Argentine Congress on March 1 stating that Great Britain has been strengthening its military presence in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands ([NotiSur, Jan. 13, 1987](#), [Sept. 14, 1989](#), [Dec. 14, 2007](#), and [July 17, 2015](#)). According to multiple UN resolutions, the Malvinas/Falklands, a strategic enclave whose sovereignty is in dispute, should be free of any arms buildup.

According to the complaint, Britain had help from Brazil in this enterprise, which in effect breaks the historic alliance between Argentina and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the dispute over the Malvinas/Falklands. Specifically, the complainants said that Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) used three Brazilian airports between August and December 2016 to refuel at least six flights carrying additional soldiers and military reinforcements for Britain's network of bases on the islands. In all, there are seven British installations in the Malvinas/Falklands, with their headquarters at Mount Pleasant on Soledad, the largest island in the archipelago.

In the ensuing debate, legislators from all parties, as well as Argentina's top political analysts, commented on the fact that British Prime Minister Theresa May had not responded in kind to the many courtesies that had been extended to Great Britain by the administration of Mauricio Macri.

The complainants, Guillermo Carmona, president of the Foreign Relations Commission in the Chamber of Deputies, and Alicia Castro, who served as ambassador to Great Britain between 2012 and 2016, used a confidential document from the Argentine State Department dated Jan.19, 2017, to show that during the months in reference, RAF Airbus A330 and Hercules C-130 planes refueled at military airports in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre during stopovers on their way to the islands. According to the document, information about these flights did not reach the Buenos Aires government via its Brazilian counterparts. Instead, Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra learned about them through the National Air Traffic Control Department, a branch of the Argentine Ministry of Defense. The Argentine Foreign Ministry has refused to release the document, making it impossible to learn details about any diplomatic actions that might have followed.

Photographic evidence

In addition to the official foreign office cable regarding planes traversing Brazilian territory, Carmona and Castro presented videos that clearly showed that the flights involve military operations on the islands. "In the photographs, one observes when missile tests are done and the creation of an increasingly larger and stronger military base," Castro said.

As the legislature sought more information, Carmona and Castro announced they would seek a suspension of all conversations between Argentina and Great Britain and said they would start the procedure for a vote of censure against Malcorra. At the same time, Zero Hora, a daily based in Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's Rio Grande do Sul state, published two photographs that

heightened the seriousness of the situation. The photos showed a Hercules plane with the license ZH882 and a RAF logo as it refueled and picked up catered food in the Salgado Filho Airport in Porto Alegre. The paper indicated that the photographs had been taken on Aug. 29, 2016, and published the same day in the blog Gaúchos Spotters (Gaúcho being the Portuguese name for inhabitants of southern Brazil). Inexplicably, neither Argentina's Federal Intelligence Agency, nor the intelligence services of the Army, Air Force, Navy, or the police, had learned of the flights, even though Gaúchos Spotters is a specialized but public website about military aeronautical information.

The Malvinas/Falklands, an archipelago located 480 km east of Argentina's Patagonia region, include two large islands—Soledad and Gran Malvina—and hundreds of small islands that comprise a territory of over 12,000 sq km. They have been occupied by British troops since 1833, and at the end of 2015 had 3,142 inhabitants, 90% of them British citizens. More than 1,100 British soldiers are stationed there, not counting the reinforcements that might have arrived on last year's flights. This would mean one out of every three inhabitants is a member of the military. In addition to its fisheries and petroleum wealth, the islands are strategic because of their position in relation to the Antarctic. Because of their geographic location, dominating the Southern Atlantic, they are considered the southernmost base of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Sovereignty disputes

The Malvinas/Falklands are among 16 ongoing national sovereignty disputes mentioned in nine UN General Assembly resolutions renewed annually by the Special Committee on Decolonization. Great Britain is the colonial power in 10 of those 16 disputes. On April 2, 1982, the dictatorship ruling Argentina at the time invaded the islands in a desperate attempt to muster consensus. The adventure ended 73 days later with the death of hundreds of drafted conscripts and a humiliating unconditional surrender. Eleven months after that defeat, the dictatorship (1976-1983) ended and Argentina returned to democracy.

Brazil violates agreement

The Jan. 19 document from the foreign office and the photographs published by the Porto Alegre daily offer a critical framework, but an official document released March 3 does little to clarify what happened. According to the document, Argentina issued an official protest and the Argentine ambassador in Brasilia reminded Brazilian President Michel Temer of the existence of "a Brazilian agreement not to allow British warships or warships posted in, or headed to, the archipelago to enter its ports and airports." In effect, the presence of the RAF airplanes in Brazilian territory violates agreements and treaties adopted within the framework of the UN, the Mercado Común del Sur (Southern Common Market, MERCOSUR), the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Union of South American Nations, UNASUR) and the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, CELAC) ([NotiSur, Feb 3, 2012](#)).

Specifically, the decision to receive warplanes in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre violated an agreement the MERCOSUR countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and [now-suspended] Venezuela) made on Dec. 18, 2011. At that time, as a result of its gestures of solidarity with Argentina, Uruguay was under heavy pressure from Great Britain. This led MERCOSUR to come to the agreement that under "no circumstance would British warships or military planes or ships with the flag of the islands be allowed to stop in the territory of member countries." In February 2012, five Caribbean nations—Cuba, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, and Dominica decided to support the South American position, signing an

agreement to that effect on Dec. 18 in Montevideo. Remarkably, the last three are former British colonies incorporated into the Commonwealth of Nations.

Since his inauguration in December 2015, and eager to differentiate himself from the administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), Macri has made a series of controversial gestures toward Great Britain. The most notorious came on Sept. 13, 2016, when he came to an agreement with Great Britain to “promote steps to remove all obstacles that limit economic growth and the sustainable development of the Malvinas/Falklands, including trade, fishing, shipping, and hydrocarbons.” Malcorra, the foreign minister, signed the document on Argentina’s behalf, but the person signing for Britain was not her counterpart but his deputy, Alan Duncan.

There were other gestures, even though on Oct. 14, just 41 days after the agreement was signed, Great Britain had made it clear it would not respect it. On that day, it was learned that troops stationed in the Malvinas/Falklands would carry out military exercises between Oct. 19 and 28 that would include missile launches. As usual, Argentina learned of this indirectly, when the Naval Hydrography Service intercepted a radio alert about “events that could affect nautical security.” The alert mentioned missile tests in an area that should be demilitarized.

Great Britain has made the Malvinas/Falklands’ flag a central issue, but the islands are not a state and they can’t really claim sovereign status. One flag, a so-called territorial flag, is blue; a second flag has the Union Jack in the top left corner and the island’s coat of arms with the motto, “Desire the right,” on the right. This is what is known in maritime language as a flag of convenience. About 30 ships use the flag, among them 20 fishing vessels licensed by the local colonial authorities. Except for one, they belong to Spanish-owned companies registered in the islands.

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