

Falklands/Malvinas: Historical Analysis of a Desperate Gamble.



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Introduction

The *Falklands/Malvinas* War between Argentina and Great Britain has been regarded as “one of the major Argentinian tragedies of this century”¹. As the only conflict in South America that involved an extracontinental force², the analysis of this event is still a matter of study. In addition, the War represented a crucial moment for Argentina’s political future, ultimately leading to the return of democracy in 1983³. As a result, it appears vital to investigate the root causes of this “desperate gamble”⁴. Therefore, the task of this essay will be to answer the question: “How would we explain the Argentine decision to invade the *Falklands/Malvinas* in 1982?”.

Historical background

Initially discovered during the XVI century, it was only in 1763 that French colonizers decided to settle on the islands. Three years later, the territories were gifted to Spain as a reward for its participation in the Seven Years' War against Great Britain. In this context, when the *Provincias Unidas del Rio de la Plata* declared their independence in 1810, they also claimed sovereignty on the islands as their legal right⁵, acquiring them in 1820. However, following rising tensions with London, the British Navy invaded the islands in 1833 establishing rule also over Southern Georgia and Sandwich Islands. Since then, Argentinian claims of unlawful occupation and desires of re-annexation have been the “banner of all nationalist currents”⁶. In this context, yearly negotiation rounds have been a recurrent theme since 1965⁷, with great faith⁸ from Argentina to reacquire the land.

¹ “... una de las mayores tragedias argentinas de este siglo” - Piñeiro (1992)

² Kelly (2010) p. 138

³ With the victory of Raúl Alfonsín (UCR) against Ítalo Luder (PJ) on the 30th of October 1983.

⁴ From Lebow (1983) p. 20

⁵ Retrospectively, we could argue that the rights claimed by the *Provincias* later found a legal basis in the Vienna Conventions regarding the codification and consolidation of international norms.

⁶ From Novaro (2003) p. 92

⁷ Lebow (1983) p.10

⁸ *Ibidem* - The Wilson’s administration recognized the legitimacy of Argentina's de facto claims to the Islands.

Theoretical framework

Having set the context in which the *Falklands/Malvinas* dispute arose, it is now useful to outline the theoretical approach. To do so, two independent variables are established: Nationalism and Defensive Avoidance. In addition, a mediating factor appeared to be crucial: Miscalculations. The paper will now turn to the analysis of each parameter.

1. Nationalism

The so-called *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* was a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. The root causes that led the *Junta* to power were: i) a long-lasting economic crisis; ii) the high level of political instability; and iii) the great violence of guerrilla warfare⁹. In this context, the premature death of Juan Domingo Perón in 1974 was a triggering factor that ultimately drove the country into chaos. As a result, the *Junta Militar* peacefully overthrew the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón two years later.

The *Primera Junta*¹⁰ immediately tried to address the critical internal situation. To fix the economy, bold neo-liberal economic reforms were implemented under the scrutiny of Martínez de Hoz¹¹. To address the guerrilla¹² threats, a bloody campaign of violence was waged against internal opposition¹³. To tackle the lasting influence of *Peronismo*, great efforts were put into repressing and dismantling trade unions.

However, the claimed goal of peace and prosperity¹⁴ rapidly vanished. In 1979, because of the structural weaknesses of the Argentinian economic policies, the country entered a state of deep crisis and hyperinflation. In addition, because of President Carter's foreign policy initiatives¹⁵, information about the systematic violations of human rights committed by the *Juntas* became public¹⁶. On top of that, harsh divisions between generals,

⁹ Novaro (2003), Chapter 1.

¹⁰ The First *Junta* (1976-80) - Videla (Ejército), Massera (Armada), Agosti; the Second *Junta* (1980-81) - Viola (Ejército), Lambruschini (Armada), Graffigna (Fuerza Aérea); the Third *Junta* (1981-83) - Galtieri (Ejército), Anaya (Armada), Lami Dozo (Fuerza Aérea).

¹¹ José Alfredo, Minister of Economy between 1976 and 1981.

¹² Mostly from the armed groups *Montoneros* and *ERP*.

¹³ The so called "Dirty War" (*Guerra Sucia*).

¹⁴ Novaro (2003)

¹⁵ A crucial role was played by the *InterAmerican Human Rights Commission* and by the protests of *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*.

¹⁶ Most notably, the "Timberman Affair".

coupled with growing opposition from trade unions (*CGT*) and political parties (*Multipartidaria*), showed great vulnerability¹⁷.

In this context, the “nationalist wing” of the regime headed by Gen. Galtieri took power by internally overthrowing President Viola in 1981. In his view, *El Proceso* had to choose between “stepping down or doing something dramatic to restore public confidence and their own legitimacy”¹⁸. It was in those years that the desire to reconquest the *Islas Malvinas* appeared to be a feasible option. As historically proved, “nothing unites a nation behind faltering leader(s) like a war. [It] can help evade social conflict as well as orienting that same struggle toward external enemies”¹⁹.

By 1982, Galtieri and the *Junta* were effectively “cornered”²⁰ and conceived the military operation as a way to “forge a unified identity that could obscure domestic divisions”²¹. However, it must be remarked how the invasion of April 1982 represented a “desperate gamble” more than a secure option. The *Junta* ended up being a “prisoner of passions they had helped create”²² and ultimately had no choice but to embark on a military operation. Thus, it is through the “nationalist” lens that it is possible to establish the first variable.

2. Defensive avoidance

The second factor mostly regards Downing Street’s behavior. It refers to the concept of collective “defensive avoidance”, which represents the “attempt by British policymakers to shield themselves from threatening realities for which they were unprepared and unable to face”²³. This concept is usually characterized by i) procrastination; ii) shifting responsibilities and iii) bolstering.

¹⁷ Most notably, the mass demonstration on the 30th of March 1982, that according to Lebow (1983) was crucial in pressuring the *Junta* to act out (just 3 days before the invasion of the 2nd of April).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.12

¹⁹ Centeno (2002) p.29

²⁰ Lebow (1983) p.30

²¹ Centeno, p.30

²² Lebow (1983) p.20 refers to the Argentinian coercive attempts to obtain a reaction from London by claiming its rights to “seek other means” (2nd of March) and sending battleships to South Georgia (25th of March). By the end of the month, the conflict had become inevitable.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 16

A clear example of the first notion could be found in the low effort that the British administrations historically put into the rounds of negotiations. Instead of being an effective peaceful channel to solve diplomatic tensions, it became an *escamotage* to keep the hopes of the Argentinians alive without really attempting to achieve concrete results²⁴. The “*Leaseback débâcle*”²⁵ of 1980-81 confirms this assumption. This event marked a breaking point in the long-lasting record of negotiations, ultimately convincing the *Junta* that London had no intention to solve this issue diplomatically.

In addition, the lack of resolution shown by the Thatcher administration in the month before the invasion showed the effects of “bolstering”. The British “convinced themselves that the course of action to which they were committed would succeed and became insensitive to information that indicated otherwise”²⁶. Thus, they become victims of the “cry wolf phenomenon”²⁷, assuming that the threats in 1982 were just a *replica* of 1977, the last instance where the *Junta* seemed on the verge of invading²⁸. However, reality proved to be otherwise²⁹ and only on the 31st of March the Thatcher’s cabinet decided to address the issue.

Ultimately, two other elements pushed Downing Street to avoid the issue. First, the geographic location of the islands caused a crucial problem in terms of logistics, as three weeks³⁰ were required to reach the Islands. In this sense, it represented a major budgetary and political constraint. Second, the biggest concern from the British perspective was the “fear of miscalculated escalation”³¹. From their view³², a preemptive deterrence operation could have been counterproductive, by giving Galtieri the perfect pretext to engage in military operations. Retrospectively, the British defensive avoidance was a key factor in the development of events. Whitehall i) misinterpreted the signals from the *Junta*; ii) invalidated the diplomatic channels and iii) indirectly triggered the conflict.

²⁴ Lebow (1983) p.17

²⁵ *Ibidem* p.10 for a more detailed account of events.

²⁶ *Ibidem* p.19

²⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁸ As the former PM stated: “*It would have been absurd to despatch the fleet every time there was bellicose talk in Buenos Aires*”- Margaret Thatcher, *The Times*, 3 April 1982.

²⁹ Lebow (1983) extensively shows how there were great proofs that 1982 was rather different from 1977, citing defensive avoidance as a direct cause for this elusion.

³⁰ Freedman (2005)

³¹ Lebow (1983) p.22

³² As Lord Carrington put it while referring to the possibility of sending battleships in the area: “nothing would have been more likely to turn the Argentines away from the path of negotiations and towards that of military force” - *The Times*, 5 April 1982, p. 6.

3. *Miscalculations*

The third factor mediated the two former aspects and applied almost equally to both sides, involving external actors.

As mentioned, London's lack of resolution pushed the *Junta* into an even deeper illusion. *El Proceso* spent an entire month "dropping hints to [British] diplomats that they [were] contemplating some kind of unilateral military action in the absence of a commitment by Britain, both to speed up negotiations and to put the sovereignty of the Islands formally on the agenda"³³. In this view, the ultimate goal for the Argentinians was to catch Whitehall's attention. However, the absence of a response ultimately prevented Buenos Aires from foreseeing any kind of military retaliation from London³⁴.

Secondly, a major miscalculation was represented by the supposed US role. In this regard, the *Junta* expected condescending behavior from the friendly Reagan administration. This assumption was based on the "enormous contribution made by Argentina to the United States in Central America"³⁵. *El Proceso* strongly aligned with the West inside the broader Cold War context, claiming a "privileged friendship"³⁶ with the White House. In this sense, they hugely underestimated the even stronger (almost personal) link between London and Washington. The hope to gain political favors³⁷ as a reward for the geostrategic role in the region turned out to be a notable mistake. In addition, the international community strongly condemned the *Junta*'s operation, passing the UNSC *Resolution 502* on the 3rd of April.

Lastly, the different ways in which Buenos Aires and London saw the *Falklands/Malvinas* issue was a significant misjudgment. From the *Junta*'s perspective, the reconquest of the territory was a matter of national interest. It represented the historically most popular and most uniting³⁸ domestic cause since 1833. In addition, the military tried to frame it as a battle "against colonialism"³⁹, trying to seize the *Third Worldist* momentum of the 80s. On the other hand, the Brits downplayed the importance of the matter until the

³³ Lebow (1983) p. 7

³⁴ "[I tell you] *that though an English reaction was considered a possibility, we did not see it as a probability. Personally, I judged it scarcely possible and totally improbable*"- Galtieri, *The Times*, 12 June 1982, p. 4.

³⁵ Moneta (1984) p.320

³⁶ *Ibidem*

³⁷ *Ibidem* p.316

³⁸ Lebow (1983) p.11

³⁹ *Ibidem* pp.24-25

conflict erupted and it became an extremely popular topic⁴⁰. As a result, it triggered the outrage of the whole British political sphere, framing the invasion as an act of “naked aggression” by a “fascist dictatorship”⁴¹. Therefore, the *Junta* misunderstood how the conflict was perceived abroad, while London failed to recognize the importance of the matter for Buenos Aires.

Conclusions

Three key variables were employed to explain Argentina’s decision to invade the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982. First, facing a legitimacy crisis and being internally cornered, the *Junta* saw Nationalism as the “last card they could play from a bad hand”⁴². Second, London’s Defensive Avoidance of the issue closed off all diplomatic channels. Whitehall’s month-long ambiguous stances toward an imminent invasion unfolded in an “air of unreality”⁴³. Third, Miscalculations worked as catalysts, generating unexpected and unwanted outcomes from both sides. Therefore, the *Falkland/Malvinas* War of 1982 could count as a textbook example of how the absence of a serious and responsible foreign policy strategy can result in the very outcome both actors tried to avoid: war

⁴⁰ Lebow (1983) p. 27

⁴¹ *Ibidem* p.25 - securing the support of both the Tories and the Labour Party.

⁴² *Ibidem* p.20

⁴³ *Ibidem* p.5

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