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SYMPOSIUM ON THE FALKLAND ISLANDS DISPUTE

Consolidate! Britain, the Falkland Islands and wider the South Atlantic/Antarctic

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On the Falklands question, David Cameron has been the most robust British Prime Minister since the late Margaret Thatcher. He has accused the Argentine government led by President Christina Kirchner of being ‘colonial like’ in its campaign to ‘recover’ the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas). This article teases out two aspects of the current UK policy towards the Falklands and wider region: first, the Falklands are increasingly imagined as a strategic ‘gateway’ to the wider region including Antarctica. Resource interests do play a major role in this geographical imagination and in a post-Afghanistan era, there might be additional UK military capacity to support the UK presence. Second, the Coalition government is, more than ever, determined to promote and protect the ‘wishes’ of the Falkland Islands community to self-determine their own future. This has, in turn, given added confidence to the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) to organize a referendum in March 2013. There is going to be no return to a more co-operative period in the late 1990s; consolidate is the new watch word.

Keywords: Falklands; Argentina; overseas territories; resources; Afghanistan

Introduction

On the Falklands question, David Cameron (2010–present) is the most robust Prime Minister since the late Margaret Thatcher. It takes a certain amount of chutzpah to announce in the House of Commons that, ‘I would argue that what the Argentinians have said recently is far more like colonialism, as these people want to remain British and the Argentinians want them to do something else’ (cited in Dodds 2012a, 683). His statement, made on 18 January 2012, came at a time when tension was mounting between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the disputed Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas). In the run-up to the 30th anniversary of the Falklands conflict, the dispatch of the Duke of Cambridge as an Royal Air Force (RAF) search-and-rescue pilot for a tour of duty in the Falklands raised Argentine hackles. Even if it was a routine posting, Argentine observers understand only too well that having a member of the British Royal Family visit the Falklands contributes further to a prevailing culture of loyalty and royalty. The Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, joined his uncles (one of whom, Prince Andrew, fought in the 1982 conflict), aunt and, indeed, grandfather as a visitor to the Islands. While the Queen has never visited the Falklands, there was talk of a royal visit in the late 1960s when UK–Argentine relations were also in a poor state largely due to a toxic combination of football, foot and mouth and the Falklands (for further details see Dodds 2002).

In contrast to Cameron, Tony Blair, former Labour Prime Minister (1997–2007), would have not accused Argentina of behaving in a colonial-like manner. In the late

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1990s, notions of co-operation, rapprochement and a ‘sovereignty umbrella’ populated the dominant political discourse. With the election of a new UK government in May 1997, there was a sense that opportunities existed for an improvement in the UK–Argentine relations. The end result was the 14 July 1999 Joint Agreement, which set out some mechanisms for cooperation over issues of mutual concern such as communications, fishing and the regularization of Argentine visits of relatives of the dead. The United Kingdom also conceded later to Argentina the hosting of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat in Buenos Aires and removed the British armed forces from South Georgia. The two parties agreed a ‘sovereignty umbrella’, which allowed for cooperation to develop mindful that the sovereignty over the Falklands remained disputed. Argentina, meanwhile, updated its constitution (1994) to reinforce its historic claims to the Malvinas and other South Atlantic territories.

For a short period, there was some optimism in the air that the United Kingdom and Argentina might be able to normalize their relationship with one another. As with Spain over Gibraltar, the Blair government hoped that both sovereignty disputes could be de-escalated. In 2002, the residents of Gibraltar, who did not want any fundamental change to their status as a UK overseas territory, decisively rejected the proposal for joint sovereignty with Spain. About the same time, Argentina entered into a period of economic crisis and political turmoil and a series of short-lived governments proved less willing to entertain the provisions of the 14 July 1999 Joint Statement. In large part, I suspect, because they realized that the normalization process contributed to the strengthening of the Falklands economy and, thus, made it less likely that *de facto* UK sovereignty would ever be subject to negotiation. In other words, sovereignty umbrella notwithstanding, the perpetuation of the status quo allowed for further entrenchment on the part of the United Kingdom and FIG.

Worsening relations: UK–Argentine relations

The ‘mood music’ worsened in 2003 and deteriorated rapidly as we worked our way through the last decade (Dodds 2012a, 2012b). Presidents Fernando de la Rúa, Nestor Kirchner and the current incumbent Christina Kirchner showed a marked reluctance to engage further with those collaborative mechanisms established in the late 1990s. This was illustrated by, among other things, Argentina’s withdrawal from the South Atlantic Fisheries Commission. The sustainable management of southwest Atlantic fish stocks remains critical for the Falklands community given the value of the licensing regime (in the range of £12–15 million per year but sometimes considerably higher). The economic benefit to Argentina, in the grander context, was less immediate. Both Nestor and Kristina Kirchner were notable in their willingness to push more forcefully for discussions over the sovereignty of the Malvinas. In November 2003, Nestor Kirchner withdrew permission for charter flights between the Falkland Islands and Chile. Since the death of Nestor Kirchner in October 2010, UK–Argentine relations have worsened further. This, in part, reflects a growing unhappiness in Argentina with other areas of Falklands-related development, namely oil and gas exploration and possible exploitation.

Internationally, Argentina has been increasingly proactive in forums such as the United Nations (including the C24 Decolonization Committee) and regional organizations such as the Organization of American States. Securing regional and global support has always been important to Argentine administrations not least because they wish to remind the wider community about UN resolutions such as 2065 (1965) calling on the United Kingdom and Argentina to negotiate over the future of the Falkland Islands (Islas

Malvinas). President Christina Kirchner, the self-styled ‘Presidenta Malvinera’, remains particularly taken with this issue and has not missed an opportunity either to demand that the United Kingdom negotiate over the sovereignty of the Islands and/or accuse the United Kingdom of militarizing the South Atlantic region. As noted, the renewal of oil and gas exploration off the waters of the Falklands in 2010 was a catalyst for this intensification. The possible development of a new revenue stream, following on from fishing and tourism-related activities, would, it is feared by Argentina, put the Falklands on an even stronger financial footing and make any sovereignty negotiations ever more unlikely.

What I think we have seen is growing frustration in the Argentine foreign policy community over United Kingdom’s reluctance to negotiate and a deliberate escalation of a variety of strategies designed to shift the diplomatic landscape (though there also dissenting voices, Palermo 2012). Three strategies stand out. First, Argentina has sought to co-opt regional partners and secure their support for the Argentine position via resolutions and statements. Argentina, in the process, wants to make the point that the sovereignty question is not settled and that the United Kingdom is politically isolated in the region. The second one is disruption. The economic circumstances surrounding the Falklands bear no resemblance to the Islands’ state of affairs witnessed by Lord Shackleton and his team in 1976 and 1982, who were commissioned by the respective Callaghan and Thatcher governments to produce reports assessing whether a different kind of future existed for these remote islands with a declining wool-based economy. Argentina has every incentive to disrupt and unsettle. In 2010, the Argentine Decree 256, for example, aimed at stopping shipping companies from crossing the Argentine territorial waters when travelling to and from the Falkland Islands. Argentina has also requested that neighbouring states close off their ports to Falklands-registered shipping. The final strand is promoting and in particular encouraging, at one stage, US and UK celebrities to endorse the Argentine position regarding the Malvinas and its sovereignty. In February 2012, for instance, Sean Penn visited Argentina. His comments condemning UK colonialism were widely reported, as were comments by the British singer Morrissey.

Notwithstanding Argentina’s ongoing endeavours to promote their interests and policies towards the Malvinas, the United Kingdom has remained relatively unscathed. For one thing, the Obama administration shows little inclination to get involved in this dispute. The Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, did offer in March 2010 to help with ‘sovereignty negotiations’ but this was rejected as unnecessary by the then Brown government in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State, John Kerry, the new appointment of the second-term Obama administration, again has not pursued the matter and is unlikely to do so, given concerns over Syria, North Korea and other international political matters, including those relating to relations with China. Regional neighbours such as Brazil and Uruguay support Argentina in regional and international forums, and might, for example, block Royal Naval ships from entering their ports, but there is little to suggest that the United Kingdom’s wider interests are being wounded by this dispute with Argentina, as used to be claimed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Anti-appeasement and consolidation

If one turns attention towards the current UK policy towards the Falklands and the wider Latin American region, then two themes prevail – consolidation (and even expansion, as I explain below in more detail) and anti-appeasement. Addressing the latter, in brief, the Coalition government’s robust stance towards Argentina is partly rooted in Conservative

foreign policy theory and practice. While it may not be a case of ‘We are all Thatcherites now’, there is a strongly held view that Argentina must not be ‘appeased’. In other words, the South Atlantic cooperation was tried under New Labour but this did not stop Argentina from aggressively pursuing its sovereignty agenda. Prime Minister David Cameron’s labelling of Argentina as behaving in a ‘colonial-like’ manner in January 2012 was an example of what I would term anti-appeasement. In other words, rather than pretending that the United Kingdom is going to do anything other than respect the ‘wishes’ of the Falkland Islands community to self-determine their own future, emphasis is given to framing Argentina as a regional ‘bully’, which has to be confronted rather than pacified.

This, of course, demanded some political sensitivity towards the Latin American region. As a region, which underwent its own independence struggles in the nineteenth century, it is risky to put it mildly for a former imperial power with a sizeable ‘footprint’ in what is modern-day Argentina to make such claims. Even if Argentina is often thought of as being part of the United Kingdom’s ‘informal empire’, the ‘colonial’ word will incite and inflame. In his Canning House Speech, delivered in November 2010, Foreign Secretary William Hague was careful to highlight the United Kingdom’s willingness to work closely with Latin American states, and in particular Southern Cone partners (SCONE nations) such as Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. It was announced that Britain’s declining engagement with Latin America would be reversed – new embassies opened, more trade/educational/cultural networking and planned ministerial/government sponsored visits.

Saying ‘no’ to Argentina is one thing. Another response is what I simply term consolidation. The Coalition government is minded to strengthen UK sovereignty over the Overseas Territories (OTs) of the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) and British Antarctic Territory. Some of it is quite subtle, such as establishing a Falklands and Southern Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and thus distinct from the OTs Division. Other areas are more public in the sense of being embedded in the June 2012 White Paper on OTs, with forewords by David Cameron and William Hague, reinforcing the United Kingdom’s commitments to the 14 OTs (FCO 2012). Another example would be the Ministry of Defence’s paper on defence commitments to the OTs building on a core task for the United Kingdom’s military forces in the Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010), namely ‘defending the UK and overseas territories’. To put things into immediate perspective, the Falklands is the United Kingdom’s third defence priority after the United Kingdom and Afghanistan – and bear in mind that UK forces withdraw from Afghanistan in 2015.

One thing that did emerge around the 30th anniversary of the 1982 conflict was some public debate about the future defence of the Falkland Islands. One argument being mobilized, by a flotilla of retired naval officers, was that naval force reductions imperilled the United Kingdom’s ability to retake the Islands in the event of a second Argentine invasion. Argentina has not modernized its armed forces and there is no evidence to suggest that any planning exists for an invasion force. The UK deterrent at Mount Pleasant Airbase includes 1200 personnel and a small number of ultra-modern Typhoon fighters. The Atlantic Patrol Task South (APTS) provides a maritime capability in the form of either a destroyer or frigate and a Royal Fleet Auxiliary support vessel. This is a standing defence commitment and there is also the ice patrol vessel HMS *Protector*, which travels between SGSSI and BAT. Further reinforcement is possible via the airbridge with Ascension Island and RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire.

What is more intriguing, in a post-Afghanistan era, is whether UK military assets play a larger role in the South Atlantic theatre. Following on from the decision to abandon the proposed merger between British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and the National Oceanography Centre (NOC) in November 2012, the Science Minister David Willetts spoke of BAS's role in providing a 'strategic presence' in the South Atlantic and Antarctic (detailed in Dodds and Hemmings 2013). Since the 1960s, BAS has been the United Kingdom's premier scientific body operating in the Antarctic/South Atlantic in a mixture of permanent and summer-only bases/stations located in South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula. Under the terms of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, all signatories including Argentina and the United Kingdom agree to put their sovereignty disputes in the Antarctic to one side for the purpose of pursuing scientific collaboration and cooperative/peaceful behaviour in general. Since its entry into force, all the claimants and indeed non-claimants such as Russia and the United States have used science, stewardship and infrastructure/logistical chains to strengthen their sovereignty positions in the Antarctic.

The United Kingdom believed that the best way to protect UK sovereign interests was to initially use scientific activity and stewardship over resource and later tourism-related activities. Being seen to be active and present remain crucial criteria. But this arguably increased in intensity. Some examples include: investing in a new scientific station (Halley VI, which replaced earlier incarnations), submitting materials to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf regarding extended continental shelves in the Falklands and SGSSI, and the pursuit of a stewardship agenda for SGSSI including the establishment of a marine protected area (MPA) in February 2012. The latter was, on the face of it, designed to protect marine biodiversity in the wake of fears of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing. On the other hand, Argentina, at the time, protested that the MPA was designed to enhance UK sovereign authority in waters that are internationally disputed, and of course outside the area of application of the Antarctic Treaty (Dodds 2012b).

What I think is happening in the wider South Atlantic and Antarctic context is a deliberate policy of consolidation. The Falkland Islands is being imagined as a strategic gateway, which helps to consolidate UK sovereignty over the SGSSI and even the BAT. In a post-Afghanistan era, an extended role for the UK military in supporting the operations of BAS in the Antarctic Peninsula is certainly possible. One area might be airdrop capability, which might complement the existing work of HMS *Protector* (which lacks a helicopter capacity). This might extend BAS work, originating from the Sky-Blu field station in the southern portion of the Antarctic Peninsula (renamed Queen Elizabeth Land in December 2012). UK foreign and defence policy-makers are deeply aware that Argentina and another counter-claimant Chile maintain a greater number of permanent research stations than the United Kingdom (two in the case of the United Kingdom compared to six for Argentina). There is currently no UK research station in the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, which is heavily populated with other signatories to the treaty, and this might be another area of possible expansion. Argentine and Chilean research stations are also heavily manned by members of their armed forces, so I suspect the United Kingdom would not be unduly concerned by accusations that it was militarizing the Antarctic region if there was an up-scaling of engagement.

There is ample evidence to suggest the United Kingdom is strengthening its commitment and presence in the South Atlantic and Antarctic. It is now accepted that the United Kingdom also has to be vigilant about these matters and this, in large part, explains why the Coalition government decided to reject the plans to merge BAS with NOC. David Willetts, the Science Minister, stated that, 'The British Antarctic Survey is a national and

international asset that delivers world-class environmental science, and this country's strategic presence in Antarctica and the South Atlantic. The UK's commitment to continuing this dual mission in the region is as strong as ever'. Rarely will you find a more explicit statement, and note, from the Science Minister and not the Foreign or the Defence Minister that these remote OTs including BAT matter to the United Kingdom. Science, stewardship, sovereignty and of course resource potential in the here and now (and possibly in the future) are mutually implicated with one another. Of course Antarctica's environmental importance is recognized, but the Minister's reference to 'strategic presence' makes it clear that there are sovereign interests at stake.

Conclusion

The March 2013 referendum in the Falkland Islands was an interesting affair. I was there as an accredited observer. The result to the simple question (concerning the continuation as a UK overseas territory) was overwhelming as expected. There was a 92% turnout and over 99% of the voting population voted Yes (Dodds and Pinkerton 2013). Argentine protests and declarations of 'illegality' were not surprising either. What is interesting is not so much the result per se, but what the decision by the FIG to organize a referendum represents. Thirty-plus years after the 1982 South Atlantic conflict, an increasingly autonomous Falklands community is actively promoting its 'wishes' and working hard to generate constituencies of support in Latin America and the United States in the main. The relationship with the United Kingdom is not taken for granted, and the referendum was a highly covered televisual spectacle, designed to show off not only Falklands autonomy, but also enduring loyalty to a country located 8000 miles to the north. As with the referendums in Gibraltar in 1967 and 2002, there can be no doubt that the 2013 referendum was designed to consolidate United Kingdom and wider support as well as counteract Argentine campaigning that the dispute was a territorial one between two sovereign nations.

The 2013 referendum is part of Thatcher's legacy. Having won a military conflict in June 1982, she helped to create a political orthodoxy of non-negotiation with Argentina over sovereignty. In the last 3 years, this has shifted towards a more proactive policy of consolidating UK sovereign interests in the wider region. There will be diplomatic and political costs to be endured, and there will be a need for near-constant vigilance, but it is something that the United Kingdom appears willing to undertake. In 1982, Margaret Thatcher asked viewers to 'Rejoice!' I suggest that in 2013 and thereafter we use the word 'Consolidate' to describe UK policy towards the South Atlantic and Antarctic OTs.

Notes on contributor

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