

Case Study: The Falklands/Malvinas Conflict

Introduction

The Falklands/Malvinas conflict of 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the disputed territory of the Falkland Islands was a short and mutually destructive conflict that has lessons for the conflict analyst, military strategist and diplomat alike. It has generated a significant amount of literature, not least military accounts from histories to personal accounts of warfare, and stands as an increasingly rare instance where the violence took place between the organised militaries of nation-states. To the observer, unfamiliar with the passionate connection of Argentina and the United Kingdom to the Islands, the cost to both countries seems out of proportion to the potential gains. To this day, the Falklands Islands are a disputed territory. Even their name is disputed: to the British they are the 'Falkland Islands' (English), to Argentina the 'Malvinas' (Spanish). Here they are referred to as the 'Falkland Islands' as the text is in English.

Origins

The Falkland Islands are an archipelago located in the Southern Atlantic Ocean and are approximately 300 miles off the coast of South America. The predominantly native born population of 2932 is mainly of British descent and the Islands are a self governing overseas British Overseas Territory with British administration dating back to 1833 and interrupted only by Argentine occupation during the 1982 conflict. The dispute between the UK and Argentina dates back to 1833. The British claim is that continuous British rule dates back to 1833 and the islanders have a right to self-determination. The Argentine claim is that the Islands were inherited from Spain when Argentina became independent and were occupied by the British in 1833, at the expense of Argentine settlers. The dispute also includes South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, which are located further south. These positions have remained consistent from Argentine independence to the current day, and continue to dominate the relations between the two countries. Public opinion has always been strong in Argentina regarding the Falklands Islands, but for the British, they were a forgotten territory, with little value other than the status of the population of the Islands. Argentina and the UK have pursued their competing positions through direct diplomacy and the United Nations.

Escalation

The situation changed significantly when a military junta came to power in Argentina in 1976, beginning a 'dirty war' against the people and preparing for a recovery of the Islands, by force if needed. The final decision to invade was taken at a time when the positions of the two parties had been misinterpreted by the other. Put simply, the UK government did not believe that the Argentine Junta would try to take the Islands by force and the Junta did not believe that the UK would be willing to retake a territory thousands of miles from the UK. For the Junta, the occupation of the Islands was a temporary tactic aimed at pushing forward negotiations towards the transfer of sovereignty at a time when the UK's token

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military presence was being reduced. The invasion of the Islands by Argentina on the 2nd April 1982 dramatically changed the perspective of the population of the UK: the Islands were no longer a forgotten backwater and the general public was wholeheartedly supportive of their recovery. The belief that there would be no actual fighting between the forces of the two nations persisted even as a substantial task force sailed south from the UK.

The subsequent military campaigns are well documented and the details of military operations explained in detail in the literature. During a time of Cold War tension a short but bloody conflict erupted over a territory with limited strategic or commercial value to either of the protagonists and between two countries whom, despite the dispute over the Falkland Islands, had little interest in actually going to war with each other. They never formally declared war, and limited their military confrontation to the disputed territories, but at a significant cost. The conflict lasted 74 days and claimed the lives of 649 Argentine and 255 British military personnel, and 3 Islanders. Hundreds more military personnel were injured, many permanently scarred. Argentina lost 9 ships and 100 aircraft, the UK lost 7 ships and 34 aircraft. There has been no conflict since the end of the Second World War in which two nations have directly fought on land, air and sea in such a manner. There have certainly been longer and more destructive wars. The Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and Ethiopian Civil war, were all taking place at the same time, devastating the countries involved at a much higher cost of life. However, the battle for the Falkland Islands, short as it was, provided lessons and warnings for the military strategist that reverberate today but fall outside of our remit here. The UK was dramatically successful in retaking the Islands and the fighting effectively ended with the surrender of the Argentine garrison at Port Stanley on the 14th June 1982.

Third Parties

The position of third party countries towards the dispute was governed by the regional politics of the global 'North-South' divide, the Cold War alliances, and their individual relationships to the protagonists. To many Latin American countries the Falkland Islands were symbolic of the European colonial era and they tended to side politically with Argentina. An exception was Chile, whom was in an unrelated territorial dispute with Argentina over the Beagle Channel. The UK was generally supported by European Economic Community (EEC) nations, whom applied economic sanctions after the UK secured UN Resolution 502 condemning the Argentine invasion and calling for their withdrawal. Argentina was successful in gaining the support of the Organisation of American States (OAS) for its case, including that the UK cease military operations in the South Atlantic. Neither the UN nor OAS explicitly condemned the military actions of Argentina or the UK. The bloc of 'unaligned nations' of the then Cold War era were mixed in their support for either party, being naturally inclined against a former colonial power, but not all seeing the dispute as a truly colonial issue, and wary of supporting the resolution of disputes by force. For the US the invasion was a major problem as they were trying to develop good relationships in Latin America and wary of Soviet influence, yet felt bound to their Cold War ally. No nation provided direct military support, although material support from the US to

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the UK was forthcoming as it became clear that the dispute would not be peacefully resolved.

Mediation and Negotiation

There were three distinct attempts at resolving the dispute through mediation, all driven by the fact that a sizeable UK task force was sailing south towards the Islands. The US Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig, engaged in two rounds of shuttle diplomacy, flying mammoth distances between Buenos Aires, London, and Washington, but largely to no avail. The main problem he encountered was that neither side would budge on sovereignty, although both wanted to avoid an armed confrontation. The second round was undermined further when the US sided with the UK over the dispute and the UK retook South Georgia. Peru also offered to mediate, effectively continuing with Haig's plan but with similar problems, not least that air and naval engagements took place, including the sinking of the *General Belgrano* and *HMS Sheffield*. A third attempt was led by the UN Secretary General, Perez de Cueller, as the two sides continued fighting and ended on the 20th May. Third party mediation and negotiation was at all times taking place under the cloud of a likely military intervention by the UK, whom would only be able to maintain the threat of the task force in the South Atlantic for a limited period of time.

Resolution

The 1982 Falklands/Malvinas conflict was ultimately resolved by the use of armed force as one side achieved military victory over the other. It did not resolve the dispute, and did in fact make the UK more intransigent than was previously the case as the sovereignty of the Islands became effectively non-negotiable. The Argentine Junta fell in 1983 and the democratic governments that have succeeded it have firmly rejected the use of force to resolve the dispute. They continue to strongly pursue the dispute through diplomacy. Normal diplomatic relations between Argentina and the UK were re-established in 1989.

Workshop Questions

1. Apply one or more of the theories presented in the CAR Theories section: What do they reveal about the conflict and which are more appropriate to understanding the case?
2. Why did attempts at a peaceful resolution fail and what circumstances were working against the mediators?
3. Is it accurate to argue that miscommunication between Argentina and the UK was a major factor in the resort to force and if so, what does this mean to the understanding of other disputes over islands?

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