

Falklands or Malvinas: What's in a Name?

Great Britain and Argentina both insist on their claims over these islands in the South Atlantic Ocean.

Argentines suffer from an open wound that deeply troubles them: the British take-over of the Malvinas, or Falkland Islands, now further salted by the hundreds of young countrymen killed in 1982 during the war to recover the isles.

The 152 years of Argentine efforts to recover the lost territory are a long and painful story. For decades the issue was little more than a small note in the back pages of newspaper, usually concerning proposals or resolutions presented by Argentina in the United Nations. It became front-page news on April 2, 1982, and geopolitical analysts began to regard the conflict as a new critical point for world peace.

In an attempt to shore up its deteriorating political image, in 1982 the Argentine military rulers made the surprising decision to recover the Malvinas by force. The adventure ended up in total defeat and in a further loss of face for the dictatorship when less than three months after the initial assault on the islands, Argentina was forced to accept unconditional surrender. Hundreds of young men were killed and large numbers were maimed, mainly as a result of the bloody battles with Great Britain's powerful navy.

Many analysts believe this defeat sealed the downfall of the military regime, already

deeply discredited because of the repression unleashed against the civilian population and the disappearance (kidnapping and usually murder) of thousands of people. Given the situation, and because of pressure by both Argentines themselves and world opinion, the military government was forced to hold democratic elections.

Once civilians returned to power under President Raúl Alfonsín, renewed use of di-

plomacy began to yield positive results in international forums such as the U.N. General Assembly. Yet in an interview with Argentine Ambassador to Mexico Roberto Tomasini, he told me that despite his government's efforts, Great Britain, "systematically insists on blocking any possible agreement and shields itself in an uncompromising policy that rests on the threat of military force."

STOKING THE FIRE

Last November 29, British Foreign Affairs Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe further opened the wound when he told the House of Commons that Margaret Thatcher's government had decided to set up a restricted area around the disputed islands in order to protect the region's animal life. The Argentine embassy in Mexico termed the decision "legally and politically unacceptable because it encom-

passes maritime space over which Argentina exercises rights of sovereignty and jurisdiction."

Before the war in 1982 England exercised its jurisdiction around the Malvinas over only three miles of patrimonial waters. After the conflict it set up a military "protection zone" of 150 miles, measured from the center of the archipelago. The prohibition was aimed only at Argentina; ships from all other nations were free to sail and fish in the area. Mr. Tomasini says this decision led to excessive exploitation of the area's fishing resources and has had a negative impact on the rest of Argentina's territorial waters.

A precedent was set for England's recent move when in mid-1985 the British government decided to regulate and control fishing in the area and presented a proposal to that effect to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO. "Under an apparently noble pretense, such as avoiding the depredation of marine life, (England) meant to bring the different countries with fishing interests in the area to the negotiating table, including Argentina," said Ambassador Tomasini. Yet this posed a dilemma for Argentina: if it refused it could be accused of being irresponsible and intransigent by blocking the praiseworthy intent to restrain fishing activity. On the contrary, accepting meant implicitly recognizing British sovereignty over both the islands and their territorial waters.

The Argentine government chose to denounce the proposal's implications and to leave research concerning the protection of marine life in the area to the FAO. Now, in an act of disrespect for the international community, Britain declared its "Administrative and Conservation Zone to Regulate Fishing" around the Malvinas, thus appropriating part of Argentina's territorial waters while at the same time discarding diplomatic



Photo by Archivo Noveidades

Not all was war... students in Buenos Aires demanded a negotiated settlement

The Islands in Dispute

The Falklands or Malvinas are an archipelago centered around two main islands, Great Malvina and Soledad, separated by the San Carlos Strait. These two large islands, together with some 200 smaller ones, make up a total surface area of 7,324 square miles. They are located in the South Atlantic, off the Argentine Continental Platform, about 200 nautical miles east of the Pata-

gonian Coast, at the level of the Gallegos River. The Malvinas are some 1,025 nautical miles south of Buenos Aires, and just 200 miles north-west of States Island, in the eastern end of Tierra del Fuego.

The archipelago was discovered by the Spanish ship San Antonio and incorporated into the kingdom's domains in 1526. Although they were at-

tached to the crown, for years the islands remained uninhabited. French whalers landed on the isles in 1763, but Spain reclaimed its territory through diplomatic channels and eventually recovered the islands.

The British landed on the archipelago in 1766 and founded Port Egmont; under pressure from Spain, they shipped out in 1774. From that date on the Spaniards established a permanent settlement on the islands and exercised their jurisdiction. Following the Argentine revolution in 1810 and the country's independence in

1816, the newly formed native government succeeded Spain in exercising complete rights over all of the territory composing the Virreinato of Río de la Plata.

But a few years later, in 1833, the British frigate *Clio* forcibly occupied Port Soledad and dislodged the original population. The British Crown then set up its own colonial administration, and some 2,500 people were brought in to populate the islands. There are presently some 1,800 inhabitants in the Malvinas, all of them of British descent.

efforts to reach a negotiated settlement.

THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Gregorio Selser is a well known journalist and a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM, who believes the British decision goes well beyond any mere philanthropic concern. For one thing, control over a considerable part of the Antarctic is involved. Mr. Selser's analysis is that, "If we keep in mind that the signatories of the Antarctic Treaty must meet sometime between 1989 and 1991,

and include any other country permanently or intermittently occupying positions on the continent, we find that Great Britain has a powerful geo-political motivation, namely to assure itself a meaningful portion of the Antarctic. (It is probably) counting on the so-called "line of projection" which extends vertically from the Malvinas archipelago and the Shetland Islands, thus covering an enormous territory, perhaps the largest extension in the region."

Professor Selser is skeptical when speaking of Latin American solidarity, as he be-

lieves the issue "does not directly concern them because they have no interest in either the islands nor the Antarctic." But he believes there is another angle from which negative effects may be expected. Selser warns that the United States feigns neutrality—and calls on both countries to negotiate a solution—"when in fact the U.S. was by no means neutral during the Malvinas war," but rather supported Great Britain.

Mr. Selser also brought to mind the 1947 Rio Treaty, signed at the petition of the United States as a precaution against extra-continental at-

tacks. Yet given another situation like the one in 1982, Selser believes the U.S. would again chose its European ally. "The real issue is the honesty and integrity with which the United States is adhering to the Rio Treaty, and this does affect relations with a good many Latin American countries."

SUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATIONS IF AND WHEN...

Both Ambassador Tomasini and Professor Selser agree that the main obstacle in the path of a negotiated settlement is Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. "So we must wait," says Mr. Selser, "until the inner workings of British politics remove her from power and a Labor government takes office. According to repeated statements by Labor Party leaders, it would then be possible to start talks that would allow a negotiated solution."

At any rate, it seems the enormous wealth that is believed to exist under more than 200 feet of ice, and the archipelago's strategic location from the military point of view, are both factors that make a solution to the conflict improbable in the short term. Thus, it is likely that the Malvinas, or Falkland Islands, will continue to constitute a risky issue for world peace. ★

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